



The Room with Dust by **inaralovelace**

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Summary: It's 1993 and she is four years into a life sentence for a crime she cannot explain without exposing a much darker truth. But when an old friend breaks her out with a plan to untangle the web of lies that has been poisoning Hawkins for longer than they could have imagined, Jane Hopper quickly realises that two does not make a party. Some reunions are much easier than others...

1. Oceans

AN:

Hey guys! So this is my first story on here. It's really high on angst—the kids are all grown up, so obviously the myriad of issues they have to deal with has exponentially expanded—but hopefully the humour of Steve and Dustin will lighten the mood a little from time to time. There's no smut in the first few chapters, as El and Mike haven't seen each other in years and circumstances have torn them apart in a really horrible, seemingly permanent way. But I can promise a lot of flashbacks and A LOT of tension in the interim. Meanwhile, there's a lot of adventure and intrigue. Hope you enjoy!

Grown-up Mileven. All rights belong to the Duffer brothers – this story is obviously not canon.

Rated M for violence, adult themes, and smut in later chapters. Forewarning, it won't be light lemon.

One Oceans

"Could you state for the record your name and today's date?"

"Jane Hopper. November twelfth, nineteen-ninety-three."

Her psychiatrist scribbled something in his folder and regarded Jane again through his wiry, gold-rimmed glasses.

It was the same thing every day. She'd be shepherded into this tiny, stark white room in her stark white hospital gown and answer the same banal questions about the weather and her house back home and what books she was reading and how they made her feel. It was like Dr Welling thought asking for long enough would eventually bring about entirely different answers.

And then there was the whole conversation piece about 'The Room.' Jane didn't know what kind of psychoanalysis the good doctor was conducting as he took her through the familiar scenario but she didn't really care. Truth be told, she was beyond caring.

'The Room' was inside her head. It could be anywhere, filled with anything. All she had to do was close her eyes and build on what was there, every day. If she thought about it at all between sessions, she was supposed to talk about it. If she imagined anyone else visiting, she was supposed to talk about it. Welling framed it to her as a place of refuge, a safehouse... But there was nothing private about it, with all the sharing. Nothing safe. It didn't feel like hers, and so the only times she visited it outside sessions were in her dreams.

Well, nightmares, she supposed, but then, calling them that didn't feel right either. It wasn't a frightening or dangerous room—she had created it, after all. There were no monsters, no government officials in suits or orderlies or doctors poking and prodding her or sensory deprivation tanks. It was just a room, gathering dust.

What was in it?

Everything.

Maybe that's why she never wanted to go back.

On the mantle above the fireplace—which was never lit and the room just stayed suspended in dim half-light—was a framed photograph of Jim Hopper holding Jane's sixteen-year-old self just after he'd taught her how to drive. They were standing in front of Joyce's beaten-down but cosy house, leaning against his truck, laughing and happy. It was candid. Jonathan had taken the picture from his usual place at Nancy's side. It had been such a family-oriented day. Jane had driven with her father for hours before they'd pulled up for dinner back home at the Byers'—now also Hoppers'—residence. It had taken him long enough, but Hopper finally popped the question just after Jane's birthday that year and the whole family was living together within the month. It was a tight fit—not nearly enough space for everybody in that old house—but they'd made it work. Hopper, Joyce, Jonathan, Will, Jane. It had made so much sense back then.

That day, it was the height of summer so as well as being swelteringly hot, the sun hadn't set until late. It had felt like the never-ending, perfect day. The usual extras were in tow: Nancy, attached to Jonathan just as unashamedly as he was to her. It wasn't gross or anything, even for a young and naïve Jane back then. They'd

just wanted to feel each other, to reassure each other. At any point in time when they were close enough to touch, they would: Jonathan would have his hand against Nancy's lower back or she'd rest hers on his knee, or he'd have his arm around her shoulders or she hers around his waist. Jane hadn't known much about romance or love back then—definitely nothing about sex—but she'd known she'd wanted to have that one day.

And with that thought, there he was, branded into her memory clear as day. He'd laughed too as Jane had fallen shakily into her father's arms and the camera's shutter clicked. He'd stolen her a moment later, wrapping his lanky arms around her and hoisting her off the ground in a hug she wanted to be lost in forever. He'd grown so tall so suddenly, it still came as a shock.

"Congratulations, you didn't crash," he'd said with a laugh.

He'd told her he was proud of her. She'd felt giddy, elated. She'd felt like such a grown up. And that night, while her parents enjoyed a quiet drink on the grass out front and Will delighted Nancy and Jonathan with his new art portfolio, she'd taken his hand and led him into her bedroom, telling him she had one more first she wanted to share with him—just him.

Maybe it had been too soon. She really hadn't known anything beyond the clinical overview she'd received in class. It was a moment that passed by very quickly. She hadn't known what she was expecting, but it wasn't that.

He'd seemed embarrassed; before, throughout, but especially after. That was when she'd caught his hands as he'd hurried to dress, muttering something about getting caught, and kissed him softly.

"I love you," she'd said, staring into his eyes. "And we haven't done anything wrong."

They weren't caught that night, but about two months later, after caution had steadily disintegrated to naught more than a chock under the door, they had found themselves in a world of pain. Thank God it had been Joyce and not Hopper, but even then, she'd gone her own version of ballistic.

There was so much life in that one photograph, so many memories woven together to make up those two smiles. It prompted so much yearning, of so many kinds.

It was the only item in the room not covered beyond recognition in dust.

Welling cleared his throat, drawing Jane's attention back to the present. "Let's talk about what you see outside the window."

"Nothing," she said automatically. "The drapes are shut." The room was a time capsule, after all.

Looking troubled, Welling sat forward, scrutinising her as one might a fly under a microscope. "Are you afraid of what's outside, Jane?"

I'm not afraid of anything anymore, she thought, and it was true. To be afraid, you had to be afraid of losing something.

At his presumptuous and smug expression—as if he knew exactly what she feared and why—she rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'll open the drapes!"

"Better yet, open the door," he challenged. "Tell me what you see."

Jane shot him a withering look before closing her eyes again. As much as she loathed this game—if you could even call it that—she was good at it. It was only seconds before she lost all sensation of that uncomfortable metal chair under her and she was standing back inside the room. Plush carpet underfoot, she made her way to the front door, reached for the knob, and paused, a sudden chill running through her, raising gooseflesh.

Welling was an asshole, but this experiment was well-designed. By building on it day by day, the room was an amalgamation of many scattered thoughts and feelings; that which was covered in dust hadn't used to be. For four years she'd been working on this room. Four years. She'd been eighteen when she'd started, everything so fresh in her mind, and now, at twenty-two, some things that had been so essential once just weren't anymore. She wasn't a high school student anymore. She wasn't a freshman in college. She wasn't Jane

Hopper, daughter of Jim Hopper. Actually, she'd been so inconsolable when they'd first brought her here, that was the first one they'd pulled out of her. Now, she was a solitary unit.

It was November twelfth, nineteen-ninety-three. She'd been a patient at Central State Hospital, Indiana, for four years. In all that time, she had received no visitors, had made no contact with the outside world. She was a prisoner here as effectively as in any real prison. Sometimes she thought she would prefer it there.

"Jane, what do you see?" Welling's voice echoed around the room, so she pushed herself further into it, thinking not for the first time that it probably wasn't the most remedial avenue to encourage a mental patient to cast herself deeper into a delusion.

What are you afraid of, Jane?

In a moment of stiff defiance—perhaps insolence—Jane ripped the door open, exposing what was outside.

Well, more accurately, it felt like she was finally exposing herself. Somehow the lack of other witnesses didn't remedy her humiliation.

She was a fraud.

Because there he was.

Mike.

She'd spent so long trying not to think his name, let alone picture his face. That's why it was her father she had immortalised on her mantle—there was guilt there too, but she could at least face it. Her father would love her forever; unconditionally, he'd told her. Despite everything. But Mike...

She stared at him as he stared back at her. He'd be older now, in reality. But in her mind, he was the same age as she'd last seen him: eighteen. Still impressively tall but starting to fill out a bit, with wild hair and deep, searching eyes, so dark a brown they were almost black, and his skin so pale that Jane had used to joke about losing him amongst her sheets. He had always been so beautiful to her, even when she didn't really understand why—even when she didn't really

understand anything. He'd always just been Mike, but because he was there, she never noticed anybody else. There was no comparison.

He stood before her, just a hair's breadth from a raging snowstorm behind him. The blur of white and the wail of the wind was so close, she needed only to reach by him and she'd surely be sucked out to her death. But she didn't dare reach out. She knew, rationally, he wasn't here. If she stepped any closer, she knew she wouldn't feel the warmth of his body, or be able to smell his distinctively 'Mike' scent. Sea salt had always come to mind and she remembered trying to explain it to him once; sea salt and a vaguely smoky kind of spice. Jane had never been much of a culinary aficionado.

She wanted to ask him what he wanted. She wanted to ask why he was here and why he hadn't come sooner. She wanted to ask why he couldn't just stay away.

But he had stayed away.

He hadn't wanted to see her ever again after what happened. And truth be told, she couldn't blame him.

He was nothing more than a figment of her subconscious right now. But this room, this exercise—this whole stupid thing—was supposed to tell her who she really was, what she was really thinking. She didn't know exactly what Dr Welling got out of it, but that's what it was for her. And now, Mike standing here in a snowstorm? What the fuck was that supposed to tell her about herself?

His eyes faltered from their lock on hers and drifted slowly to her lips. His parted.

"Eleven," he murmured.

Jane's eyes snapped open and she took a deep breath. It didn't quite qualify as a gasp but it was enough that she knew she wasn't diving any deeper today.

"Talk to me, Jane," Welling commanded, his impatience only thinly veiled. "What did you see?"

She took a second to centre herself. "A snowstorm."

He seemed to believe the half-lie. "Did it scare you?"

"I wasn't expecting it," she answered tactfully.

He cocked his head to the side, scribbling again in his folder. There was something so lazy and arrogant about the way he scribbled. Jane knew it was an odd thought to have—a very odd reason for resentment—but she resented him for it all the same. He was effectively scribbling what her life would be onto the paper, deciding whether or not she was fit to be treated as a regular human being—deciding whether her answers reached the standards of his personally-set bar.

Once he was finished and he returned his attention to her, Jane glanced between the folder and his face. "So? Did I pass?"

He smirked at the joke and replied, "That depends on how you answer these last few questions."

She groaned inside but aloud insisted, "Hit me."

He clicked his pen multiple times before starting on a fresh page in the folder. Bloody folder.

"Knowing what you now know about what lies outside, would you opt to remain in your room or to venture forth and explore the snowstorm?" he asked.

A flash of Mike's face and the cold burn of the whipping snow made Jane's throat go dry, but she didn't miss a beat. "If I say 'stay in the room', you'll think I'm hiding from something, won't you?"

"Would you be?" he countered, another annoying knowing smile pinching his mouth.

Jane had half a mind to throw him through a wall—with her mind or her bare hands, it didn't really matter.

"I'm somehow at home with the dust and the doilies," she jested.

"Is that right?" His smile was definitely a smirk now. How quickly it morphed into something truly unsightly. "Have you ever opened that

door before?"

"You know I haven't," she said.

"Well, this is the first time we've discussed it," he allowed, but now he frowned, feigning confusion—as if it wasn't just a pathetically transparent attempt to mock her with whatever winning blow he would strike with his next remark. "But then tell me... How does the dust accumulate?"

For a moment, Jane forgot herself. "It's not a cleanroom, you moron."

He stiffened at the insult but moved past it to continue this line of questioning, apparently committed to proving her logic inferior.

"How does *that* much dust accumulate, Jane?"

He was scrutinising her again. God, it made her uncomfortable.

"Is it even really dust? Or did you cover it all up so you wouldn't have to see it anymore? So you wouldn't have to face it? Is that what the snowstorm is, just a veil to cover whatever is really waiting outside?"

Jane held her ground. "I told you, I'm not afraid of what's outside."

"But what's inside?" Welling's gaze bore into her and she looked away.

Again, Mike's face flashed through her mind, but this time it was closely followed by Hopper's. But he wasn't smiling like in the photograph. He was as she had last seen him, holding his shotgun up, aimed directly at her head. Well, a couple of inches above her head, but she knew in that moment what it was like to stare directly down the barrel. She saw anger and fear fade to resignation in a split second, and when he lowered his gun in the next, she knew before the shot rang out in her ears that it was over.

Despite the ringing making it impossible to hear, she knew she had never screamed louder. Every window and drinking glass within a six-block radius shattered as she watched her father crumple to the ground.

"It wasn't me!" she'd shouted over and over when they dragged her away.

But really, it had been. Maybe she hadn't pulled the trigger but that hadn't mattered in the end. It didn't matter now. Everything had, without a doubt, been entirely her fault. In one evening, she'd ruined the lives of everyone closest to her and lost the single most important person in her life.

She looked up again, this time unwavering. No jokes, no attitude. There were no jokes when it came to Hopper. Not ever. "What's inside is locked up here."

"And Mike?" he pushed further. "I know you miss him."

"I don't miss Mike," she said automatically, but it was strange—this was the first time she knew she meant it.

They had been oceans apart for years now. She'd used to go to sleep crying over the thought of all the things she'd miss, like his graduation, his first day at his dream job, his wedding—all events that for so long she hadn't questioned she'd be a part of. But everything was different now. The oceans between them weren't obstacles keeping them apart, evil gates or barricades standing in the way of their beautiful, happy future.

The oceans were bars, and the bars were there to keep her in.

They had to.

AN:

I'll try to upload at least twice a week, but I do work and study, so some weeks it might only be once. Please leave me all the feedback you wish, good or bad. I'll try to make sure I stay on top of reading it! Thanks so much for sticking with me thus far and I'll have the next chapter up ASAP. -Inara

2. Intruder

Two Intruder

Jane lay in bed that night, restless. There were a multitude of reasons for this. For one, she was hungry. For another, she was cold. The patients were never fed right in this godforsaken place and the bedding was paper thin—it did nothing to protect against the elements of Fall. But most importantly, there were the events of today. Welling was always a competitive egomaniac, desperate to hide the fact that he was probably a thumb-sucker until he was twenty-five and still sometimes on rough days. Jane had promised herself years ago that she'd never lose sleep over anything that first-class mouthbreather had to say, and she wasn't about to let herself down now. It had nothing to do with him.

In part, she was afraid to dream. But she didn't even need to get that far; she closed her eyes, and there was his face, his hair fluttering around it as his gaze dropped to her mouth and he whispered her name.

She'd been Jane for just shy of a decade now, but he'd only ever called her El. It became something of a pet name when everyone else adjusted habits.

Mike Wheeler in a snowstorm.

She shook her head and rolled over to face the wall. Granted, her room was small enough that whichever way she lay, she was basically face-to-wall regardless, but something about the solid expanse directly on the other side of her eyelids made her feel safe. It was strange, considering the crippling claustrophobia she'd experienced as a child, but somehow the solidness of it—the impenetrableness—comforted her now. She could imagine it was a shield for her mind; nothing could get in, nothing could get out.

Mike Wheeler in a snowstorm.

Mike.

With a sigh of exasperation, Jane flipped onto her back.

"Get out of my head," she whispered in the darkness. *I don't want to see you.*

Didn't want to or couldn't?

She hadn't lied to Welling before; she didn't miss Mike. Not in the way she'd used to, at least. She didn't long for his long arms around her, whispering into her hair that it was all going to be all right. She didn't burn for his touch, for his perfect alabaster skin and his hot mouth to cover her, to consume her. Then again, the drugs they had her on here made it very difficult to have a sex drive. But it was deeper than that. Mike Wheeler had been her other half. But that was before. Why was he suddenly all she could think about when she'd blocked his memory out years ago?

Mike Wheeler in a snowstorm.

Jane could feel herself drifting, and she let sleep rise up like a dense black cloud and swallow her.

"Eleven," he said.

She took a step back, her breath unsteady. "You're not really here."

He didn't say anything else. Just watched her.

She scrubbed her hands over her face in an effort to clear her vision. Nope, still there.

"What do you want?" she demanded, feeling more panicked than irritated.

For a moment, she didn't think he was going to answer, his expression static.

But then he looked past her, into the dim room behind her, his voice sounding far away. "Where are you?"

Jane didn't understand. She half-turned to take in the room behind her. She'd never seen it from this angle. Usually she stood there by

the mantle, going along with Welling's leading questions because it was the easiest way to kill their hour. But even in this dim light, there was something...

Dust motes came together across the room, sort of a heaving outline at first, fuzzy and nondescript. Then a clearer picture formed. Still only grey, still only dust, but Jane would recognise the silhouette of her father anywhere. His posture was rigid as he stared down the sight of his shotgun.

It was all he'd had with him in this strange house. But he'd known it was the wrong firearm to save her. She remembered him teaching her back outside his grandfather's cabin—shotguns are pointed, not aimed, because they're generally designed for shooting at moving targets. There was no way he could have shot the man behind her with any guarantee she wouldn't also fall victim.

"It's the gun," Mike said from behind her, reading her mind.

Her father's ghost began to lower his weapon, resigned to his fate to save her, and Jane's stomach dropped.

She whirled around to face Mike, but a handgun came up in her face. Mike wasn't the intruder, she knew that. So why was he holding the gun?

"Goodbye, Jim Hopper," he said, but it wasn't his voice. It was the voice that had haunted her for years.

"No!" she screamed. She couldn't watch it happen twice.

She threw herself between the pistol and her father and saw Mike fire. The shot was deafening, and then, like switching off a TV screen, everything suddenly went black.

Jane writhed in her sheets as she came to, gasping and crying. The sheets felt like lead on top of her; damp with her sweat, weighing her down. She couldn't get free.

She was so disoriented that it took her a minute to realise it wasn't just her sheets; someone was forcibly holding her down, covering her mouth. She struggled against the intruder, a sudden wave of panic

prickling her skin that it was the same orderly who had raped schizophrenic Catherine Fuller in the showers, but the sheets made it impossible to get a grip on him.

In a burst of fear and rage, she threw him off her into the opposite wall. He dropped and thudded against the floor heavily and swore at the assault.

"Jesus Christ, Jane!"

Jane's nose dripped as she sat up fully, holding up her hand to finish him off.

Then she realised that she recognised his voice.

He was so much taller now, pulling himself up to his full height with a groan. She couldn't see him, of course—not even his vague outline—but she could hear where his voice was coming from.

"Dustin?" she asked incredulously, her voice so small and breathless with disbelief.

"Hey, girl." She couldn't see him but she could tell that, despite the soon-to-be bruises, he was smiling. "Long time no see."

Jane released the breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding. "Dusty..."

Several beats passed.

And suddenly she launched herself into his arms. She felt so small against him. Granted, she'd grown a lot taller since they were kids and filled out in a few places once puberty hit, but she was well underfed here and hadn't had a good night's sleep in years. His arms seemed to wrap around her like giant pythons; strong, thick, unyielding.

This was too surreal. Jane didn't even quite believe he was here. How could she? Four years, no visitors, and suddenly Dustin was somehow here holding her in her locked mental cell?

It just didn't add up.

"I know I've got a lot to explain," he mumbled into her shoulder, eliciting a breathless chuckle from her at the irony of that statement. The last time she'd seen him was at her murder trial. "I just don't know where to start."

"You know you'll be gutted if they find you here?" she hissed.

He pulled back just enough to fish some keys out of his pocket and jingled them gently near her face.

"They're not finding *anybody* here." He sounded so proud of himself and then came that familiar giggle. Jane could go her entire life listening to that giggle. Though it was much deeper than before, somehow it was still the same.

There was just too much to process about this whole situation. All Jane could manage was, "How?"

"Easy."

She could practically hear his grin.

"I'm staff, baby. You think I went to college for a desk job?"

That didn't answer any of her questions. "Dustin—"

"I'm a psychologist," he answered, knowing what she was going to say. "Got a job here when all the government renovations started six months ago. I knew you were here, I just couldn't find you. Then one night I managed to find the tunnels and realised there was this whole underground wing—"

"Wait, what?" Government renovations, tunnels, an underground wing. It all sounded like a Famous Five novel to Jane.

Dustin didn't falter. "Why do you think you have no window, Jane? Why do you think no one's visited you in years? We haven't been able to find you—you disappeared!"

"No, this was my official sentence." She shook her head. "It's on all the Court documents—"

"Jane, it's not." Dustin sighed heavily. "You have no idea what's been happening in Hawkins since you left."

"Since I was arrested!" she corrected, outraged.

"Yeah, of course, arrested." He dropped his voice lower, as if being overheard could mean death. "Jane, what are they doing to you here?"

Her eyebrows pulled together. "What do you mean?"

"Jane, half this place is already shut down for patient abuse and neglect. What have they done to you? You can tell me."

"Nothing!" she insisted. "I mean, yeah, there has been an impressive level of neglect, but seriously, nothing. Just a lot of therapy—"

"Okay, well, whatever they've done, we'll have to figure it out later," he whispered. "I've got to get you out of here."

"Wait, Dustin!" She ripped her arm out of his reach as he dragged her toward the door by her wrist. "I can't just leave! I'm a convicted murderer!"

His tone made it sound like this was literally the last problem on his mind, like it deserved the same amount of pause as if she'd stolen a stick of gum. "Yeah, but you didn't actually do it."

She stared in his vague direction, completely flabbergasted. "That's not what Johnny Law says!" It also wasn't entirely what *she* thought.

"Look, Jane..." He sounded tired. Dustin never sounded tired. "Whatever is happening here—whatever they want with you—I think it's connected to a bunch of weird shit that's going on back home."

"Like what?" Jane wrapped her arms around herself, frozen to the core at this point. She actually felt sick with cold.

"Like people suddenly moving away. We've got a new mayor, a new sheriff. Almost a whole new police force, in fact. And now local government's trying to clear Merrill off his own farm—some of the other farmers, too."

"What does this have to do with me?" she asked.

"Because they used Hopper to do it!" he replied. "They used his death to mount their campaign. It was huge, Jane. They said that while the murderer was behind bars, a lot had to change if Hawkins would ever be safe again. Parents ate it up. Mayor Hopper said—"

"Mayor... Who?" It was information overload, but those two words pulled her up short.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," he said. "The new mayor is Jack Hopper... Chief's brother. Arrived for the funeral and never left."

"But Dad didn't have a brother," Jane insisted.

"I know." Dustin's voice was grave. "That's why we need to get you home. They locked you away for a reason, Janie. I don't know why, but we're gonna find that bastard who killed your dad and we're gonna make him pay. And we're not gonna stop until we cut off the head of the snake."

"But Dusty..." Jane couldn't help feeling like all of this was just a whole lot of weird with no connections, at least when it came to her. "Why now?"

"I told you," he said. "I tried to find you before but—"

"Okay, then why me? What about the rest of the party?" She tried to laugh it off but what she said next had definite sting. "I mean, come on, I can't have been your first choice."

He exhaled slowly, and somehow she could feel his sadness.

"Jane, my family moved away," he admitted finally. "My mom started acting really weird, suddenly talking about *Florida*! She *hates* the coast!"

"I remember." Jane recalled a group trip they'd all taken to California after high school graduation. She didn't think she'd ever seen someone so at odds with the water.

The number of times Mrs Henderson had said, "It belongs in a tap,

not on half the earth's surface!"

"Anyway, the mayor's wife runs a new tech company with a branch in town. Computer stuff. Both Will and Mike have jobs there. It's like they never leave."

At the mention of his name, Jane's throat went dry, and suddenly it occurred to her that besides the obvious legal dangers of returning to Hawkins, there was a whole other kind of danger she hadn't considered: reunions.

"I'll come with you," she finally said. "But I have to stay hidden. I can't see—"

"I know," he said easily, simply. Like he really did understand.

"So... Where do we start?" Jane knew they were probably going to have to have this conversation again before she was able to properly make any sense of it, but considering Dustin seemed to be the man with the plan, he had to have a starting point.

"I've got some documents at home you'll want to take a look at," he answered, opening her cell door a crack and listening out for any disturbances.

Slowly, he moved out into the corridor, and with the extremely faint light from the night nurse's station up ahead, Jane could see him motioning for her to follow him. As they approached the station, she could see Nurse Fiona had passed out.

Jane cocked an eyebrow at Dustin. "Your work?"

He shot her a pearly grin with a wild glint in his eye and whispered, "Drugged her coffee."

As she followed him up some emergency stairs he had to use his staff card to access, Jane whispered, "You're going to have to tell me the full story at some point."

"A magician never reveals his secrets, Janie," he quipped, ushering her into yet another half-lit corridor.

This one looked like an observation suite, except from what Jane could see, all the cells were empty.

"It's pretty reckless, you know," she hissed as she blindly followed him into another staircase. "Using your card like that. Can't they log who's coming in and out?"

She almost bumped into him as he stopped and turned to face her, holding up the card. "Oh honey, you know I've covered us from every angle."

Jane looked at the card. Nurse Fiona Watkins. Tough old bitch who needed to lose some weight.

She looked back at Dustin. "Don't call me 'honey'."

"Agreed," he conceded, on the move again. "One and only time, I swear."

"Where do you even live now, anyway?" she asked. This definitely wasn't the time for conversation, especially for sharing highly sensitive information, but Jane found that now she had someone to talk to—someone she actually wanted to talk to—she just couldn't stop.

He laughed up ahead of her. Quietly, of course, and a little bit breathlessly on account of the stairs, but it was such a genuine sound. Jane had really missed laughter.

"Funny story, that," he answered. "You'll only believe it when you see it."

AN:

So I know Mike and a bunch of other characters aren't in it yet, but I didn't want to rush anything because I want the reunions to be right. I can promise that Chapter 3 will involve a fan favourite and a couple of laughs (hopefully—if my writing does its job), as well as a bit of angst as Jane sneaks away to do something she really shouldn't. Additionally, Chapter 4, which I'll hopefully upload back-to-back with Chapter 3, will follow Jane as she makes the first of many break-ins into the tech company Dustin mentioned. Wonder

who she'll run into? :P

3. The Fly

AN:

Okay guys, I know I said I'd upload Chapters 3 and 4 back-to-back, but Chapter 4 isn't finished yet because Chapter 3 is so long and took me AGES! Anyway, I wanted to at least upload something today. Chapter 4 will go up tomorrow. Hope you enjoy!

Three The Fly

The escape had been strangely effortless. Then again, Jane knew Dustin must have perfected their route over weeks—maybe months—of careful calculations. He knew where every nurse and guard would be at all times, even when it wasn't procedure. He knew when they took their bathroom breaks and where the orderlies snuck out for a late-night smoke. He'd spent enough time getting on the good side of the nurses that he knew how much gossip they had to share between rounds. He even knew Harold the janitor's routine to the minute. So when he and Jane surfaced on the ground floor of what had used to be Seven Steeples—the ornate Victorian building that had been the women's department until its demolition and modern rebuilding in the Seventies, Dustin had explained, as if this were part jail break, part tour—it only took ten minutes to take an unmanned fire exit out back and trek across the frozen grounds through dense tree cover, and just like that they were standing under the wrought iron fence.

The only barrier left between Jane and freedom.

She had mixed feelings about that, obviously, but her mind kept shifting back to her father's funeral—which she hadn't, in reality, been permitted to attend, not that she'd been welcome anyway. But the thought of a strange, faceless figure, claiming personal tragedy over a lost brother—over a lie—using the memory of her favourite person in the world to do it... That thought kept her steadfast.

Dustin dug a rucksack out of the shrubbery and pulled out a large, thick towel and an extra-long leather belt with a giant buckle that even the Seventies wouldn't want back. Jane shot him a bizarre look

to match the bizarre bug-out bag.

He seemed offended. "What? It had to be stuff they wouldn't question at the gate!"

Jane took the belt in her hands and stuck her whole fist through the eye of the buckle, suppressing a grin. "And they didn't question this?"

He snatched it back from her and traded it for the towel. "Do you see the top of that fence? I couldn't bring rope or a ladder or a grappling hook, for Christ's sake!"

He was right. It was too high to climb without some sort of aid, and the buckle would serve well enough to loop over one of the spires.

The spires.

"So the plan is to get up and impale ourselves?" Jane asked as Dustin effectively lassoed one first try, which impressed her enough to wonder how much practice he'd had and where.

He shot her a look that seemed to question if her intellect had peaked in high school. "What do you think the towel is for?"

Jane bit back a smile. It was so strange, feeling the urge to smile again. Her face felt hot, her mouth felt like a rebelling second entity attached to her, a mind of its own... But Dustin always had brought out the smile in her.

She let it free. "How could I ever have doubted you?"

"I don't know," he deadpanned, plucking the towel from her again and swinging it up over the fence—still folded long-ways for extra padding. He turned to her. "Okay, you first. At the top, try to stay up on your feet. It's a towel, not a mattress, but this *is* a Princess and the Pea kind of situation."

"Except the pea is a row of giant iron spikes," Jane quipped, grabbing hold of the dangling belt. "I feel like Indiana Jones. All I'm missing is my hat."

Dustin looked at her for a second, his expression flat and

unimpressed, before shooing her impatiently. "Just get up!"

It really had been too soon to laugh. Jane quickly discovered she had *no* upper body strength and in his effort to give her a boost, Dustin had basically thrown her over the fence. She landed flat on her back, the breath knocked out of her, and for a minute it was tough to distinguish the stars from the bump on her head and the real ones in the sky above her. At least she hadn't screamed.

Dustin landed on his feet next to her, belt already in hand and he whipped the towel down, slinging it over his shoulder.

He turned to her. "You okay?"

This was actually the first time Jane had ever truly appreciated the cold. The frozen foliage underneath her now cradled her pulsing skull. "If I say no, will you let me lie here for a minute to ice my head?"

He shook his head and held out his hand. "I just rescued you from an evil sanatorium. You think I'm going to let you catch your death now?"

Jane sighed and closed her eyes, steeling herself for the dreaded vertical thrust. "A girl can dream." And she clapped her hand into his.

She slept most of the way back to Hawkins. Well, dozed was probably a better word. Flashes of streetlamps and power lines under a deep navy sky pierced through the fog of sleep, the same as Dustin's liquid tenor ghosted around her ears as he sang along to *Every Breath You Take* under his breath. After the Snow Ball in 1984, Nancy had made him a mixtape with all the songs from the dance on it and labelled it 'Nuts.' No one else knew what it was about—Mike especially had pestered them about it for ages—but Dustin had treasured it since that day. When he'd finally caved and bought a Walkman in senior year, he'd put the tape in his car and never taken it out, no matter how sick of the songs everyone else got. It was nice to know some things never changed.

When Dustin finally pulled up and cut the engine, it must have been

close to dawn. Gently, he squeezed her shoulder, giving her a tiny shake.

"Jane? Janie? Wake up. We're here."

The whisper-yelling brought her to. She straightened, wincing as her neck ached from sleeping on it funny. She probably shouldn't have slept after knocking her head anyway, but the familiar warmth and worn padding of Dustin's car had been too much to resist. She rubbed sleep from her eyes and looked out the window.

They were parked in a gravel lot, backed up against a pasty, off-yellow concrete monstrosity. On the opposite side, the L-shaped tin wall of a chop shop. Old car parts and metal storage boxes littered the grass alley alongside the driveway. Jane knew where they were.

"You're squatting behind Maggie's Café? What happened to your house?"

"Used it to pay off college," he answered. "And would you know it, I'm *still* in debt. We can't all get scholarships like your boyfriend."

As soon as he said it, he knew he'd fucked up. His eyes went wide as saucers and he looked at her in absolute horror.

"I mean—"

"It's fine." She pushed herself out of the car, slamming the door mildly between them.

He couldn't help it. Yes, years had passed, but he'd also spent years calling Mike that, and vice versa—his habit of just calling her 'girl' had originated from when he'd used to refer to her as 'your girl' to Mike.

"Mike, where's your girl?" she remembered him saying when Mike arrived first to anything. She'd always followed closely behind, of course, so the presumption that wherever one of them went, the other followed was not out of line.

Dustin scrambled out of the car. "Jane, I'm really—"

"You don't need to be sorry," she cut him off. "Really, you don't. I just... This is all a lot, Dusty." She felt tears prick her eyes.

"I know." He popped the trunk and dug out a beaten old briefcase and a full laundry bag. Then his eyes sparked. "Oh, and for the record, I live *above* Maggie's Café. In an apartment."

"We're not squatting then?" Jane was grateful for the change in subject, feeling herself relax.

He indicated a fire escape behind her. "Ladies first."

This was at least a climb she could manage. She followed the stairs all the way to the top and waited for Dustin on the landing. He brandished a key and muttered something about making her a copy before letting them both into the cramped foyer.

Watching him kick off his shoes, Jane realised how she must've looked; bare feet covered in grime, hospital gown, leaves in her hair, nose frozen red. Her nose. In all her confusion and eagerness to escape, she'd completely forgotten about using her powers earlier. She touched her nostril gingerly; it was crusty with blood.

There was a bang from deeper inside the apartment and Jane startled.

Dustin glanced toward the room the noise had come from and back to Jane, putting a finger to his lips and motioning with his other hand for her to follow him.

Another bang as they ventured further down the hallway, passing three open doors that comprised two bedrooms and a bathroom, and Jane wondered why her friend wasn't reaching for some household object that could be used as a weapon.

Finally Dustin stopped in the last doorway that Jane saw over his shoulder opened out into the kitchen. She couldn't believe her eyes.

"Took you long enough," the man balancing precariously on the bar stool muttered, glancing Dustin's way. "You know, you'd think changing a lightbulb would be simple, but *no*! Not when there's absolutely no good angle to screw in the—aaargh!"

It all happened so quickly. Dustin stepped out of the way while his roommate briefly returned his focus to the task at hand, working only by the dull morning light filtering in through the window over the sink. When he looked back he seemed to have a heart attack. Mid-sentence, he let out an honest-to-God scream, and then he was crashing to the floor, flinging his arm out for purchase but only managing to knock a plastic fruit bowl over. It clattered to the ground and oranges spun out in all directions, one rolling right up against Jane's toes.

She scooped it up and hurried to stand over her old friend's crumpled form.

"Brown Eyes?" he mumbled, his words vaguely garbled. Definite concussion risk this time.

She offered a hesitant smile.

"Hey, Steve," she said. "Sorry to make you drop everything."

The poorly-timed joke went right over Steve's head as he glanced between the two of them and then back up at the light fixture. The unsecured bulb had dropped with him, shattering against the edge of the counter and onto the floor near his feet.

"I just..." His eyes lost focus and his eyelids fluttered closed. He sounded like, if he weren't about to pass out, he might cry. "...wanted a sandwich."

Carrying Steve's limp body to the couch had been a job and a half. He may not have gotten fat in the years Jane was away, but she'd definitely grown no stronger, and Dustin had proven to be surprisingly weak for someone with such a solid frame.

Jane sat with their old babysitter while Dustin fetched the documents he'd been talking about from his room. He'd been happy to wait until she was settled, but Jane couldn't relax now. Her mind was racing.

Timidly, she reached out and brushed a lock of Steve's famously perfect hair out of his eyes.

"Still the best hair in Hawkins," she whispered with a smile.

She'd grown close with Steve very quickly after the night she closed the gate. Hopper had seen how well he looked after them all, keeping them out of trouble, even after the Mind Flayer was trapped back in the Upside Down. So that was when Steve became her actual babysitter. It was a pretty full-on gig, especially when Hop started working a lot more overtime in a pre-emptive plan to afford to send her to college, but considering he was a bit lost and that his grades weren't up to par for his own college career, Steve liked doing something he was good at. Jane was glad, too, because without becoming part of the family, Steve would never have found his life's vocation as a cop... and a proper father figure in Hopper.

He was the one who had found her, four years ago. He was the one who had called it in. And even though she'd confessed—even though she gave him no reason to love her anymore, no reason to *trust* her anymore—he'd let her take the fall not because he believed she was guilty, but because he knew that, whatever the reason, she was lying for a good one. He'd told her as much, through the Perspex, right before her trial started.

"Janie, I don't know why you're doing this," he said. "I know better than anyone you'd never hurt your dad. You said so at the house... Just no one listened."

He'd actually been crying, his eyes watering. The few tears that did escape, he hadn't bothered to wipe away. He wasn't ashamed to miss the man who, in so many ways, had made him one.

"But I know that after everything, you would've told me if you could. " He put his palm against the glass. "Friends don't lie, right?"

"Okay, I've got 'em!" Dustin flourishing a manila folder, coming out of his room, jogged Jane back to the present.

He slapped it into her lap and sat himself down on the edge of the wooden coffee table. It was impressive, the number of things they'd managed to fit in this room. Their apartment didn't strictly have a lounge room, so they'd put a tiny iron patio table with two chairs outside on the tiny back balcony amongst the flower pots and used

the remaining space inside to put in a couch and a TV. Jane couldn't imagine they used the patio table at all while it was cold, but come spring it would lovely, facing the setting sun.

Uncertain about what she'd find, she read the file's thickly-scrawled label and shot Dustin a look. "Vacation spots?"

"You think I should have labelled it 'Government Secrets'?" he fired back defensively.

She turned the cover, pleasantly amused by the illustrated title page. "I had no idea you wanted to go to Disneyland so bad."

"What kind of idiot doesn't put up a second line of defence?" He smacked her knee. "Just read it."

Her smile fell when she skimmed over the following page. Therapy transcripts. *Her* therapy transcripts. In full. She hadn't realised they'd done that.

She flipped through the pages in a rush, hoping to find some explanation for it somewhere—anything that would make this make sense.

She recognised the sessions, of course. She remembered them all. Nothing detailed, of course, but rereading them, she could vaguely recall. It came as no surprise that Dr Welling would keep a detailed record of their conversations at CSH, but these... These weren't her sessions with Dr Welling. These were her sessions with Dr Ford.

"Where did you get these?" She didn't mean to sound so aggressive; she knew she wasn't angry with Dustin. But she was fucking angry with somebody.

His expression was sympathetic as he answered, "Steve lifted them from the station. Chief had 'em on his desk."

"But *why*?" Jane couldn't believe it as she rifled through more pages, the dates going as far back as her first year of school—real school. She'd needed some help dealing with it but she never thought anything she said really deserved writing down. Her time with Dr Ford was an outlet. He'd been such a comfort, there to help her. Or so

she'd thought. Wildly, she turned to Dustin. "Why do you have these, Dustin?"

He held up his hands in peace, slowly reaching out to rest his hand on her back. "Steve was getting behind in his workload because no one wanted to partner with him. First time King Steve hadn't been part of the in-crowd." When Dustin saw she was not at all amused, he continued, "He stayed back one night to work on some case files. That's when he saw them."

"Saw who?"

"The Chief and Mayor Hopper."

Dustin and Jane both jumped as Steve pushed himself up.

He winced as he righted his head. "I think my brain's splattered."

"Grey mash or not, tell her the rest," Dustin pushed.

Steve rubbed his temples but obeyed. "It became a pattern. Once a week, they'd have a meeting. At first I thought it was just to discuss town safety but the second time, the Chief saw me; got all defensive and told me to go home. Been wary of me ever since."

"Not a professional secret keeper then," Jane commented. "The ones trained in lying don't falter like that."

"Honestly I think he's just a pawn." Steve reached for the transcripts and started rummaging through them, looking for something. He continued absently, "But a pawn with evidence. I just don't know what the evidence means."

"A small setback," Dustin piped up, unconcerned.

Steve found the transcript he was looking for and handed it back to Jane. "I've sorted them by date since, but this was the one I actually saw on his desk. He had me in his office to ream me for some shoddy paperwork and I saw your name at the top."

Jane carefully read over the first page. It was a stapled booklet, just like the rest of the transcripts, and at first glance, there was nothing

to differentiate this one from the others; just another session where she talked about never feeling normal. She remembered Doctor Ford had asked her if she really wanted to.

But at the bottom of the page, a word caught her eye and she felt a knot bigger than all the other knots in her stomach. A blizzard. He'd asked her about a blizzard. Specifically, asked her to imagine she was lost in a blizzard.

"I want you to imagine you're lost in a blizzard, Jane," Dr Ford had said. "I want you to imagine you're lost in a blizzard, and that you need to find a house."

But why? None of this made sense. It had been so many years ago; *she'd* completely forgotten about it. He'd only brought it up once. Back then, it had just been some vague exercise to convince her that subconsciously, she knew she did belong—because the house she found, the house she felt safe in, was any house that had Hopper in it.

Her blood ran cold. It had had a fireplace.

"You see, there's a stamp here that—" Steve reached across her to point at something on the paper—a stamp, presumably—but her vision was suddenly blurry with angry, confused tears.

"Shut up!" she almost yelled, ripping herself and the document away. She was on her feet, pacing; overwhelmed.

"Janie." Steve sat forward. "I know this is hard, but it says 'candidate.' Candidate for what? Look at it," he urged.

Jane did. He was right. There was a big blue stamp in the top right-hand corner that read 'CANDIDATE' in block letters. So there was even more that she didn't know how to rationalise. Great.

"Blizzard," she whispered under her breath. "Why would he ask me about a blizzard?"

Both men stared at her blankly.

"Is that important?" Steve asked, tone as thick as his hair.

She made an exasperated noise. "You don't understand! There was this whole psychoanalysis thing they did at CSH, like worldbuilding... I had to create this room... It's hard to explain."

"Wait, a room?" Dustin dove for the discarded pile of transcripts.

While it really wasn't the issue at hand here, Jane felt decidedly uncomfortable knowing that two of her greatest friends in the world had read through everything she'd tried to keep hidden from them for years. It would have been enough to make them feel like she was a stranger.

"Found it!" Dustin all but threw it at her in his enthusiasm. "The bottom, under 'Professional Recommendations.'"

Jane stacked the two booklets she was holding and found her place on the unfamiliar one.

Under the heading, there were a number of lines about prescribed drugs and dosages—anti-depressants—but the final two lines brought her up short:

Recommending the addition of Periphax 100mg 2x daily; subject to dosage increase if symptoms persist

ROOM trigger determined

"I thought it was an acronym," Dustin said quietly. "But maybe not."

A trigger? There'd never been any trigger. She'd designed every facet of that room in therapy. Except, evidently, the actual house with the fireplace and the snowstorm outside... Those had been fed to her. The snowstorm had obviously been a consciously forgotten memory of Dr Ford's scenario and the house had stayed in her mind due to trauma...

Except she'd imagined the house long before she ever physically went to it.

She felt sick. What was happening? Was it all insane coincidence or was Doctor Ford a liar? And despite not always being the brightest crayon in the box, Steve was a good cop and always asked the right

questions in the end. This time was no exception. Candidate for what?

"What is Periphax, Janie?" Dustin asked, voice quiet. "I asked Dr Collins when I broke my arm, but he said he'd never heard of it. And I never came across it in any psychiatry journals when I was trying—"

"It's an anti-psychotic," she answered quickly, the words rushing out.

She didn't want to lie anymore.

It wasn't schizophrenia; Dr Ford had assured her dad of that. But it was something—something eating her up inside. For a while, Hopper had worried it was something paranormal—like maybe the Mind Flayer still had a foothold in their world somehow—but she never showed any symptoms like Will's. She was still Jane. She just wasn't right. She was so scared all the time, waking up screaming from nightmares that never made any sense, soaked through with sweat. She'd started sleepwalking. She'd wake up in the middle of nowhere, and had to find her way home on nights that Hopper didn't wake up and find her first. She'd heard things in the dark, felt strange compulsions—like driving to places she'd never been. She just wanted it all to stop. Hopper only let her on the Periphax in the first place because of how badly she'd wanted it all to stop.

But wait.

That wasn't quite right.

He'd only let her on the *anti-depressants* because of how badly she'd wanted it all to stop, but that was just because of the Imposter Syndrome back then, not everything else. Sophomore year in high school, she'd felt such a strong disconnect from everyone—*everyone*. Even Mike. It wasn't apathy—she cried about it when she was alone—but something inside her just always felt different, like no matter what, she would never be what they wanted her to be... Who Mike thought she was. She felt like such a fraud.

Hopper insisted that she was just dealing with a lot more than most kids her age, but when he realised he couldn't help and that she wasn't getting better, he let her start sessions with Dr Ford.

The anti-depressants had helped. She'd done well in school and felt right with her friends again... She'd felt secure enough and in love enough to lose her virginity to Mike. With Mike.

Then the nightmares had started, and the sleepwalking. She and Hopper had argued about taking her off the anti-depressants but they'd helped her so much and Dr Ford assured him they didn't have the chemical properties to be the root problem. Hopper had been at a loss when Ford had raised the possibility of anti-psychotic medication.

But they had fixed her. It was a miracle; a God-send. He couldn't have imagined she'd be so well-rested and bright.

Two years, that medication had kept her happy. And with her happy, Hopper seemed happy. Obviously not that his teenage daughter was loaded up with drugs, but happy knowing the alternative.

And then he died. And happy was out of the question.

"Wait," Jane said out loud, flipping both booklets back to their cover pages and holding them up side by side. "*Wait!*"

"Brown Eyes, what is it?" Steve queried. He'd been calling her that since he'd shown her *Bambi*. Almost eight years ago now.

"The 'candidate' one—it came after!" she exclaimed. "*After* the Periphax!"

"So?" the boys asked in unison.

"So, the snowstorm and the house and *everything* came *after* the Periphax!" She thought back hard. "Ford's sessions changed after I started taking it, became more hypothetical, but I always thought it was just because I was feeling better so we could focus on other issues. I didn't question it, the same as no one questioned when I needed anti-psychotics because I always had flashback freak-outs, so nightmares and sleepwalking were just more of the same!"

"Jane, what are you saying?" Steve pressed, obviously wishing he already understood—wanting so badly to understand for her.

"I'm saying, I think I only became a 'candidate' for whatever after I started taking the Periphax." Jane thought it through again as she took a moment to breathe. It could be a massive leap. It could be. It could be just wishful thinking on her part—that there was someone else to blame for why she was like this—but it all made sense. At least, enough sense to run with it until they hit a dead-end. "I'm saying that all the PTSD shit I had before the anti-depressants wasn't the same as the stuff after. My nightmares from before were all memories—they really happened! I was never afraid of the hypothetical! But the nightmares after—they were all imagined, all fiction."

"And the sleepwalking?" Dustin asked.

Jane shrugged. "Never happened before."

"So..."

She could practically see the cogs turning in Steve's head as he took a moment putting it all together. His face was so expressive when it was confused.

"You think these anti-depressants gave you psychotic symptoms?" His eyebrows were practically to his hairline, his tone just as disbelieving. "But why? Why would Ford do that?"

Again asking the right question. Why *would* Ford do that? Jane didn't know. But she was pretty sure she knew the beginnings of it:

"To justify the Periphax."

Despite how awful it was if it were actually true, she felt herself practically vibrating with excitement. She was trying not to get too ahead of herself in case this turned out to be bogus, but if it weren't—if she was right and she'd never actually needed anti-psychotics to quell a natural imbalance in the first place—then maybe the impossible weight she'd been carrying for four years could be lifted. Maybe she could stop being afraid of herself.

So much for not getting ahead of herself.

She stared at the documents again.

Steve may not have been part of the in-crowd; he may not have always been the sharpest tool in the shed or the first horse out of the gate or whatever anyone wanted to say about him. But he'd been looking out for her since 1984 and he always noticed when something was off. Those cops had no idea who they were dealing with, who they so easily dismissed. Because now not only was he a seasoned thief but he was also a fly on the wall.

She glanced up at him. "You did good, Steve."

He winked at her and flashed a smile and she knew that if this had been 1985 she'd have fainted from her girly crush. "Always here for you, Brown Eyes."

She went back to reread the line about the 'ROOM trigger.' It was definitely too soon to make the leap that it was related to Welling's exercise. At least, too soon to be certain about it. But it was something she was going to figure out, before anything else, if possible. Whether the boys supported it or not, she was paying Dr Ford's office a visit later. She wasn't going to be stupid, but she was done being hidden away. She just needed a plan. She needed to know *exactly* what questions she wanted answered.

"There is one more thing, though," Steve said nervously. "I wanted to say before but I didn't want to...interrupt the flow."

Jane's forehead furrowed. "What is it?"

He pointed to the documents. "See the stamp? See how there's a symbol beside 'candidate'?"

Jane looked at it. It was kind of wiry, like twisting weeds—a little Celtic. "Yeah? What about it?"

"That's the logo for Fause."

Jane frowned. She'd never heard the word before. At first, she just thought he'd said 'house' with an itch in his throat. Not that that would have made any more sense.

At her uncomprehending expression, Dustin explained for Steve, "Fause... The tech company I told you about. Where Mike and Will

work."

Understanding dawned. Well, not exactly understanding. Actually, the opposite of understanding. Now Jane had more questions than she'd ever thought possible. But it was a start.

"I don't suppose there's any known link between Dr Ford and Fause?" she asked.

Steve shrugged. "Not that I know of, but I can see if there's a paper trail."

Jane shook her head. "There won't be, but we should try anyway. Just be careful."

"You think I'm stupid?" He laughed. "Janie, those transcripts you're holding are not the originals." He turned his head away, muttering more to himself than to her as he added, "Took me hours, too."

Jane was about to ask Dustin if he'd noticed anything else out of the ordinary in the transcripts when Steve turned to him and snapped suddenly, "I can't *believe* you didn't tell me you were bringing her! I thought we were going to talk about this—plan it together!"

"It was need-to-know!" Dustin exclaimed defensively.

Steve looked like he might blow a fuse. "*I'M* NOT NEED-TO-KNOW?!"

4. Gimme Shelter

AN:

Hey guys! Sorry I'm late. Been a big couple of days. This one is long again. I need to get better at breaking things up more evenly into chapters but I knew exactly where I wanted this one to go, and I just couldn't compromise. Sorry if it gives you tired eyes! I promise the reason for the M rating is coming, but this story is plot-driven. Mike and El's relationship will be rehashed in flashbacks and then further developed as the story progresses, but it's all got to fit and be believable. But don't worry, it'll happen. I know I'm taking ages to reunite them, but they'll be spending A LOT of time together soon. Whether they like it or not. :P

Four Gimme Shelter

"I want you to imagine you're lost in a blizzard, Jane. I want you to imagine you're lost in a blizzard, and that you need to find a house."

"My house?"

He hushed her softly. "Shhh. Don't speak. Just imagine."

His voice was so soothing, she felt she might fall asleep.

"Imagine you come upon a house you've never seen before, at the end of a long, lonely road. It's honey-coloured brick, with tangling vines framing a green front door. Open the door, Jane."

Jane's breathing was slow and deep. She could feel her hair fluttering in the breeze created by the ceiling fan, tickling her neck lightly. She was cold. Freezing, in fact. It was the middle of winter but Dr Ford still had the air-conditioning and the fan on high in his small office, and having not expected to need it indoors, Jane had left her sweater in Hopper's Blazer. She supposed it helped, though, for imagining the blizzard.

"Inside, there's a small entryway, then a room. There's a couch and a bookcase and an unlit fireplace. Do you feel lonely, Jane?"

She did feel lonely. Here she was, imagining herself in somebody else's house in the middle of a snowstorm. She was cold. She had no food. She saw no phone on the wall, so there was no way of calling anyone for help. Even if there had been, she had no idea where she was. Stranger's house or not, she was all alone. Nobody else was here. The black hole of the fireplace seemed to make that abundantly clear.

"Do you feel lonely, Jane?" Dr Ford repeated, and Jane realised that this time he expected an answer.

"Yes," she breathed, not wanting to drag herself out of her reverie by making too much noise. "Yes, I feel lonely."

"No one is there for you," he prompted.

"No," she agreed. No one.

"You're completely alone."

"Yes."

Another brief pause, and when he next spoke, Dr Ford sounded closer.

"I want you to stay in that room, Jane, and I'm going to put my hand on yours. When I do that, I want you to picture very clearly your answer to my next question. Do you understand?"

Jane felt as if she were lost in a dream. Inside this room, even in the cold, even with the snowstorm whipping and shrieking outside the still-open door, it all felt so far away.

"I understand," she whispered.

She was sitting in a giant armchair in Dr Ford's office. It was the most comfortable chair she'd ever sat in. The soft leather was cool against the backs of her arms and her neck as her head rested back, nestling her as she focused her mind.

"You're alone and scared," he murmured. "You don't know what to do."

Her palms rested flat on her thighs, as previously instructed, and a moment later, she felt Dr Ford's much larger, warm hand cover hers.

"Who would make you feel safe?"

The warmth emanating from his hand filled Jane, and suddenly, there he was, standing right beside her, holding her hand.

Hopper.

He smiled.

She smiled back.

Dr Ford squeezed her hand, indicating it was all right to open her eyes, and they smiled at each other.

Jane's eyes snapped open and she took a deep breath. She was lying under a blanket on Steve and Dustin's couch, staring up at the ceiling. This morning, after the boys had quit bickering like children, Dustin had fetched her a proper pillow and some actual pyjamas and told her they'd figure out a more permanent sleeping situation in the next few days. Jane had told him thank you but truthfully, she was more than happy to crash on the couch. She'd been sleeping on a foam cot for four years—she could handle a couch.

It had to be close to midday by now, and Jane was hot under the blanket but she knew that wasn't the only reason she felt over-warm.

Lecherous bastard. Lecherous, lecherous bastard. She couldn't believe she'd never questioned it before—she hadn't even remembered it until now! There had to be a law somewhere about touching patients—especially underage patients.

How had she not remembered it?

Jane thought back. Had it seemed like such a non-event to her sixteen-year-old self that she hadn't even properly registered it when it happened?

But that was ridiculous. She'd spent her entire childhood being poked and prodded and dragged around by people she never gave permission to touch her. Had she really trusted Ford that much?

She clearly never told Hopper about it because he would've gone in

there and thrown the doctor through his second-floor window.

She couldn't believe she hadn't remembered it.

Pushing herself up, she saw Dustin had left her a scribbled note on top of the stack of transcripts on the coffee table.

Hey psycho. Gone to work (got to keep up the façade). What you need is in the fridge.

Jane grimaced. Yeah, she was going to make sure that didn't catch on.

Forcing herself to her feet, she padded over to the refrigerator and swung it open. Just below eye-level was a doggy bag from Maggie's and she saw Dustin had labelled this one, too. Thankfully, all this one said was 'Eat.'

A giant caramel, white chocolate, blueberry and walnut muffin and a slab of bacon and spinach quiche awaited her inside the bag and Jane was so disgracefully hungry that she didn't even bother heating the quiche up. The actual meal took her about two minutes to wolf down but she spent the next thirty clutching her aching stomach back on the couch. God, she really hadn't had a decent meal at CSH for as long as she could remember.

Clearly, though, her memory wasn't at its most reliable these days.

On that note...

She sat forward and found the 'candidate' booklet again. If her whole Periphax theory was correct—whatever that theory actually pointed to—then at the time this transcript was recorded, she would have been on the Periphax for three months, and the anti-depressants for a bit over eight. If that's what they even were—anti-depressants. But they would have to have been. They *did* make her feel better. A lot better. She'd been able to relax again around everyone she loved; she'd been easy-going and trusting for the first time in her life. Could one drug do that *and* give her psychotic symptoms at the same time?

It was the same question with the Periphax: could it correct symptoms while still having a secondary purpose? She'd heard of

anti-psychotics being prescribed as sleep medication, but beyond that?

Did dosage matter?

And, the million-dollar question: what possible reason could Dr Ford have had for prescribing two inter-reliant drugs to a sixteen-year-old girl whose only initial issue was feeling unworthy to belong?

As Jane tried to sort the timeline of events with the inclusion of drug intakes in her head, her gaze returned to Ford's first mention of the blizzard and stopped short.

Lecherous *lying* bastard.

She reread the dialogue to make sure she wasn't mistaken.

Nope.

There was no mention of the physical contact. None at all. It went straight from *"Do you feel lonely, Jane?"* to *"Who would make you feel safe?"*

She shoved herself to her feet, ignoring her protesting stomach, and marched toward the front door. She didn't have a key yet but she wasn't going to forget where the boys lived. If this were the city, she'd feel bad about leaving the apartment unlocked but this was *Hawkins*. Nothing ever happened in Hawkins.

Except, well, that whole thing with the monsters and the secret government lab... And now apparently a conspiracy.

Was it too soon to call it that?

She shook it off. Priorities, Jane. She'd been seeing a psychologist every day for the past four years and twice a week for the two years before that. It was about time she had another session.

The giant laundry bag that Dustin had pulled from the trunk last night blocked her path, sagging like a half-melted snowman in the middle of the entryway.

Not like that, you don't! I can't stop you from going out but I can save your ass. Again.

Jane rolled her eyes as she read Dustin's third note of the day, taped to the front of the bag. She could just imagine his obnoxious tone.

It's all in the bag, Janie.

She huffed and dragged the bag back into the better lit kitchen, loosening the drawstrings and emptying its contents onto the floor.

Huh.

A substantially oversized fleece-lined khaki jacket, a plain black T-shirt, some jeans, a hairbrush, a toothbrush, a wallet, a watch, a pair of white Converse, hair dye, and about forty dollars' worth of makeup. Inside the wallet, thirty dollars in actual cash and—she reddened—a gift card to Mary Sue's Lingerie and Hosiery Boutique. She didn't know whether to feel touched or extremely uncomfortable that Dustin had even thought to consider her underwear situation.

Still squatting over her spoils, she picked up the box of hair dye. Ugh. Bombshell blonde. Complete with bleaching solution.

Joy. Because she'd been so great at girly things before.

She wished Nancy were here.

Her desire to confront Ford drove Jane as she muddled her way through bleaching and toning her incredibly long tresses. Having gone four years without a haircut, the finished product looked even more bedraggled as she stared at herself in the bathroom mirror than when she'd first started out. So, after conditioning her freshly-bombshelled locks—which honestly looked a lot more cool-toned and dirty than the peroxide tone displayed on the box—she did what any incredibly stable, clear-thinking, law-abiding civilian would do: she fished a pair of all-purpose scissors out of the kitchen drawer and cut nearly a foot off. Now, instead of hanging almost to her waist, it stopped bluntly at the knobbly wings of her shoulder blades.

Next was clothing and makeup. She realised too late that it probably

would've been much easier to shower while rinsing her hair than awkwardly sticking her head in the bathroom sink and making the shower an entirely separate experience, but what was done was done.

After she dried off, she realised she definitely was thankful for Dustin's gift card as she pulled on her jeans sans underwear, and vowed to make that the second item on the agenda after Ford's office.

Going braless was fine for the time being since she'd lost so much weight off her breasts at the hospital. If she kept eating the way she had at breakfast though, that wasn't going to last long.

By the time she finally finished getting ready, she vaguely reminded herself of how she'd looked post-makeover in Chicago with Kali. Although maybe that had more to do with the fact that she'd never worn dark makeup before then, so it had seemed like such a dramatic change when really it had mostly just been the wonders of eyeshadow. But she could recall the feeling almost exactly in this moment.

All the makeup Dustin had bought was quite dark and vampy—not Jane's usual style at all. Then again, she'd been locked away for four years... It was probably as good a time as any to admit she didn't really have a style anymore.

It wasn't that she hadn't been into makeup at eighteen. She knew how to apply it and everything. After her dad and Joyce had gotten together and she'd become a constant presence in Jonathan's life, learning how had been her big bonding experience with Nancy. Joyce too, actually.

Joyce.

Oh, God. That was another reunion she couldn't even contemplate.

She stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were thick with black liner, smudged out into her smoky charcoal shadow. She'd tidied her eyebrows up with tweezers and given them a bit more shape. Her lips were the colour of rich red wine; she'd only filled them in with lip liner, wanting to avoid accidental mess later on if she ate. In the end, she'd opted to avoid applying base of any kind—a very light dusting

of a brownish-rose blush to her cheeks and she already felt overdone.

The rest of her look was extremely simple. She'd tucked her T-shirt into her waistband and stolen one of Steve's belts to hold up her jeans. Unlike Dustin, he had extremely narrow hips, so even though she'd still had to punch an extra hole in the leather to make the belt tight enough for her waist, she'd made it work.

The jacket had a hood, she noticed, so as she left the apartment and slunk out onto the downtown street, it served a dual purpose: keeping her warm and keeping her face hidden.

The apartment was actually prime real estate for her purposes. It was only a short walk to Dr Ford's old office, just around the corner from The Hawk, and she was just about to cross the road when she was jerked back by her hood.

She spun around, ready for a fight.

"Thought so." Steve pulled her hood back up to cover her face, unimpressed yet evidently unsurprised.

"Steve," she groaned, taking a moment to calm her racing heart, then pushed him off her. "What are you doing here?"

"No, what are *you* doing here?" he hissed. "You cannot just waltz into Ford's office and demand answers! You think there's any other option besides me rolling you out in cuffs if he actually discovers you're here?"

Jane weighed her head side to side, knowing she was being stupid but not wanting to admit it. "You rolling him out in a body bag?"

Steve took her by the wrist and ushered her under a nearby street tree, positioning her so her back was to any shop windows.

"I understand you want to know what's going on, Brown Eyes, but you can't take risks like this. It's stupid!"

She ripped her wrist out of his grip. "What would you have me do?"

"I would have you stay put and let me look into Ford's connections like I said I would!" he snapped, and the very common image of his younger self shaking a dish towel at her sprang to her mind. Getting disciplined at age fourteen; why would anything be different at twenty-two?

She fumed at being spoken to like a child but used her silence to concede to him that he was right.

Suddenly his expression changed. "What's happened to your hair?" He looked her up and down properly, apparently for the first time today, and followed up with, "And your face? And—and everything?"

"Your grimace is doing wonders for my ego," she deadpanned. She figured it would probably hit too close to home to make fun of his poor detective skills.

His expression didn't change, reaching out to rub a lock of her hair between his fingers, as if checking he couldn't change the colour back that way.

She batted his hand away. "We don't want people recognising me, Steve. What of it?"

"You think a new 'do and swollen lips are going to throw off the Wanted poster?" He shook his head. "Yeah, no. I made you from a block away."

"Swollen—" She cut herself off. Not important. "Then what do you suggest? I can't stay locked up in that apartment forever. I'll go crazy!"

He shot her a look that made her want to punch him.

Exercising restraint, however, she still tried to grab him by the shirtfront. "Oh, you little—"

"I'm kidding! I'm kidding!" He trapped her hands in one of his and straightened his collar. "Seriously, just a little patience." Seeing her poorly-concealed dejection—she really wanted to accomplish *something* today—he sighed. "I tell you what, we'll break in tonight. I went into the station early this morning so they won't be expecting

me to stay back late. We'll go about nine. Happy?"

'Happy' wasn't exactly the word, but she nodded. "Satisfied."

He nodded once, as if to punctuate the deal. "Good. Now run along home."

She pulled a regretful face and sucked air in through her clenched teeth. "Oh, would that I could. But I need to buy a couple of things."

"I'll get 'em. What things?" His fists were planted on his hips, his stance as imposing and resolute as he could make it. He *really* wanted her to go home.

Which is why his willingness to fold so quickly after she answered him so deeply amused her.

She cocked her head to the side. "Steve, do you really want to go into a lingerie shop and buy panties for me?" She could have said 'underwear.' She could have. But somehow 'panties' was so much worse, and it showed on his face as he looked like a deer caught in headlights.

"...No." He looked like he had junior year when he'd picked her up in the school parking lot and admitted much more loudly than intended that he'd been waiting all day to watch *Princess Bride* with her: frozen in a moment of horror, hoping no one had noticed, wishing he could erase himself from the scene then and there.

Jane didn't know why he'd been so embarrassed about that. *Princess Bride* had swords and giant man-eating eels and shit. She guessed it just had something to do with the title.

She nodded. "Didn't think so." Taking pity on him, she changed the subject. "You'll keep digging?"

"What do you think I'm doing here?" he questioned. "Town Hall is down the street. Nothing on public record, not that that's surprising but I've got to start somewhere."

Jane nodded and zipped up her jacket tighter, starting to back up down the street, back towards The Hawk. She vaguely remembered

where to find Mary Sue's. "Keep looking."

"I live to serve." He tipped the hat he wasn't wearing and they parted ways.

Heading back down the high street, Jane felt a flutter of panic as she saw Mrs Sinclair crossing the road toward her, her arms loaded with groceries.

Jane's breathing came in fast and she kept her head down, suppressing the compulsion to bolt. *That* would most certainly draw attention.

But the older woman didn't even notice her, continuing on with her very ordinary day along her very ordinary walk back to her car.

Reaching the street corner near RadioShack, Jane glanced back. She knew it was only Day One, but she didn't know if she was ever going to get used to being back in Hawkins. Even if there was something going on off-the-books, outside in the open everything just seemed so...normal. And yet, here she was, feeling that total disconnect again. Granted, this time, her reason for it was a bit different, but it still felt awfully familiar. Lucas' mom was the warmest of women. She'd used to welcome Jane into her house and given her a seat at her table without a moment's hesitation. The boys' mothers had all, in their own way, played mother to Jane at some point in time.

And now Jane was hiding.

And, she realised a moment later, being totally pathetic.

Solve the problem, get her life back. That was the plan. That was the incredibly over-simplified and, she realised, possibly impossible plan.

But she couldn't think like that.

She turned on her heel, making a beeline down the street for Mary Sue's.

And that's when she saw him.

She froze, mid-stride. It was as if every muscle in her body locked up

and she absolutely, completely froze. It had been at the back of her mind since she'd followed Dustin through the darkness of the hospital corridors last night; if she got out, if she got to Hawkins—if, if, if... What if she just saw him, in so mundane a situation such as walking down the street? She'd imagined her heart would beat so fast it would burst out of her chest.

But it didn't.

It downright stopped.

Mike.

And just like that, all she could think about was the last time she saw him.

He was already sitting on the other side of the Perspex when she sat down. He picked up the phone and, slowly, she did too. Neither of them said anything.

Her trial started tomorrow. She'd been in this temporary prison for weeks now. The Park, the inmates called it, since it was basically smack bang in the middle of nowhere and all that surrounded them was forest. Since she'd realised there was no way out, she hadn't wanted to see him—hadn't wanted to face him. She needed to stay strong but he made her weak.

But that wasn't right. The thought of losing him made her very, very strong. And that's why she had to lose him in an entirely different way. That's why seeing him was so hard... Breaking his heart for real, even more than she had already done recently, was going to be so much worse than anything she could imagine.

"Big day tomorrow," he said quietly.

The way he was still able to be so gentle toward her—after everything she had done—made her feel like her heart was ripping apart in her chest.

"We're all going to be there," he continued when she said nothing. "Best seats in the house."

"Don't try to be funny right now, Mike," she chided, her voice almost cracking so she spoke even more quietly. "We need to talk."

The look of relief on his face almost floored her.

"El, I'm so glad you said that. I hated how we left things—"

"So did I," she interrupted him, her tone as purposely vacant as her eyes.

He was still babbling on. "I was just upset. I wasn't listening—maybe I made you feel like you couldn't tell me—but I'm listening now, I promise. I know it wasn't what it looked like, just like this isn't what it looks like—"

"It was," she said. "It was what it looked like." Taking advantage of his sudden wordlessness, she added, "And this is...exactly what it looks like."

"El..." he started, but she cut him off again.

"You just don't know when to give up, do you?" She did her best to sound scathing. "We're not kids anymore, Mike! Fucking hell, look at where we are! You're heading off to college next year and I'm—"

"What, a murderer, are you?" He'd found his voice. "You really expect me to believe that?"

"What could I really expect from the boy who doesn't even believe what he sees?" she shot back, and she saw a tiny crack appear in the faith in his eyes, fractured by hurt.

"Oh, I see," he said, nonetheless hurt but refusing to be beaten down so easily. "A lot more than you think."

And he pulled an orange canister out of his inside jacket pocket and banged it down hard on the metal bench in front of him. Jane didn't even have to look to know what it was.

"Periphax?" Mike demanded, seeming mostly angry now, although he was smiling in disbelief. "It's Austrian, you know. Not widely circulated so all the information I could dredge up was in German, but I'm not such an idiot that I don't understand 'antipsychotikum' when I see it!"

"How did you even get that in here?" she demanded in response, knowing there was no way the guards would let him into a prison facility with drugs on his person.

He sat forward, his fingers tightening their grip on the handset. He held up the canister. It was empty. "I found this under your bed last year. I was waiting for you to feel like you could trust me enough to tell me about it. But, since we're here a year later..." He trailed off.

She stared at him blankly. "What do you want me to say?"

"What do I want you to say?" he repeated incredulously, and then incredulity gave way to outrage. "I want you to tell me what the fuck is going on!" His eyes were wild and a guard barked over to pipe down.

Jane inhaled deeply and let the breath go. In a bored voice, she said, "Isn't where we are pretty self-evident of that for you?"

"You didn't kill Hopper," he dismissed. "I don't know why you're saying you did now, but I know you didn't."

"What is so fucking shocking about it, Mike?" she demanded. "You've got the label right there in your hand—'anti-psychotic'!"

He shot forward, his face barely an inch from the glass as his eyes bore into hers. "And I still don't believe it!" he snarled.

"Just because you tell me every pathetic little detail of your life doesn't mean you know everything about mine," she murmured, not breaking her calm. Calm was cruel. He needed cruel. Even if it made them both feel like dying. Her gaze was frigid. "You're being an idiot."

"And you're being a bitch!" He spat the word with more ferocity than Jane had ever heard from him. But then he sat back on his stool properly, pushing a fingertip against the glass between them, clearly making a real effort to calm down. "But I'm on your side." He exhaled a long breath and his shoulders sagged. When he looked back up into her eyes, his were pleading.

"What happened, El?" he murmured. "Whatever happened, you can tell me. I know we haven't been us lately. There's still a lot we need to talk about." He shook his head, his voice suddenly so earnest and gentle. "But I love you. Everything else, I can forgive—just give me time. Just tell me this isn't..." He took a shaking breath. "Tell me this isn't true."

There was too much in that. Too much love, too much everything. Even if

she wasn't in the current mess she was in, Jane wouldn't deserve that. Even if she wasn't trying to be callous, she knew she couldn't come close to formulating an appropriate response to that. Sometimes Mike was just beyond her.

As things were, she kept it simple. "Screw you, Mike."

"What is going on with you?" he demanded.

She glanced down, steeling herself. Then she looked back up, dead-eyed. "I just don't want to settle for less anymore."

The response was immediate. Mike stared at her, completely frozen. She'd chilled his blood to ice.

Even Jane couldn't believe her cruelty.

It had been about a year ago. She'd been on the anti-depressants for a few months then and it was the night after their first time, almost to the hour. They'd been working on homework together all evening—with the door open, like his mother always insisted—and he'd finally told her why he'd been so upset the night before—so upset that even after she'd kissed him and told him everything was all right, he'd still all but run out the door.

He was in love with her—so in love with her that he couldn't even think of what he'd do if she left him. He lived in fear of that day, always feeling inferior, always in awe of her. He said he always thought it was just a matter of time before she realised she could have anybody, and that he just didn't measure up.

Now, in the visitation room, Mike's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, his eyes faintly glossy. "And that's what I am, is it? Less?"

Jane set her jaw. "You?" She sighed, halfway to a scoff. "At this point, you're just noise."

His lips pursed as he clearly tried not to cry, but his eyes properly welled up at that. He tried to rationalise it. "Okay, I know this has been a really emotional time for you—"

"Don't patronise me!" she snapped. "I know what I'm saying! Just like I knew what I was doing in that house."

He looked at her for the first time like she was a stranger. His voice was hollow, cracking on the last word. "What are you saying?"

Jane kept her charade in check. "I'm not a victim here, Mike."

He stared at her for another moment before he glanced down at the Periphax and then into his lap. Jane couldn't tell whether he was hanging his head or making sure he wouldn't forget to take anything to go.

"Clearly." He pocketed the canister and stood up, still holding the receiver. He went to hang up, but then pulled it back to his ear and said quietly, "Wouldn't want you to settle."

And he hung up. Although torn, Jane eventually decided she was glad he didn't wait for a response. She had no idea what she would have said to him. Slowly, he dragged his beautiful, sad eyes from her face and walked out.

Jane sat there, unmoving and ice-cold, still holding the receiver, until eventually the guard yelled at her to get up.

She couldn't even wait until she was back in her cell. She cried as soon as she was on her feet. Walking, crying, allowing herself to be ushered wherever. She didn't care anymore. She cried all night until her eyes felt like they'd been drowned in chlorine and her body felt devoid of liquid.

By her trial in the morning, she had cried herself numb.

Now, he was coming out of a sandwich place she didn't recognise. Must have been new.

Jane didn't know what came over her. She just followed him. Mindlessly, stupidly followed him.

She followed him to the Fause building—the only building in Hawkins to stand higher than two storeys. She followed him through the Merchandise Pavilion, as it was so pretentiously signed, and through a perfectly white door that led down a perfectly white corridor to a pair of pristine stainless-steel elevator doors. Mike got in and Jane all but threw herself into the emergency stairwell that was so providentially positioned as he turned around to press for his

floor.

She realised she had no way of knowing which floor he was heading to without seeing the numbers light up on the wall, so she sprinted up the stairs to the first level from ground. A few people glanced up with weird looks on their faces when she stuck her head through the access door, but she didn't loiter long enough to be asked any questions. Mike had already passed Level Three.

Sprinting up another three flights to Level Four, Jane stuck her head out. Cubicles. Lots of them. With worker-bees in headsets and sunny yellow polos. But no Mike.

She dashed up to Level Five only to reel backwards, redirecting her momentum against the wall just inside the access door and trying to swallow down her gasps for air. She didn't think he'd seen anything. He'd only just started to look up, catching her movement out of the corner of his eye as he tried to unbutton the top button on his navy sweater with one hand, clutching a doggy bag in the other. Jane waited a minute, trying desperately to control her breathing. Then she turned and practically pressed her eye up against the tiny window that barely served as a peephole.

The corridor was empty.

Slipping through the doorway and edging in the only direction he could have gone, still casting very little thought as to what the hell she was doing, Jane peered around the corner and saw three doors at the end of this new corridor. With so few doors around the place, she figured this must either be a level for large offices or conference rooms. Maybe storage, but considering how easily she'd slipped in, she figured security was a little lax for that. Dustin had filled her in a bit on Fause last night as he was brushing his teeth; their technology wasn't exactly cheap.

Only one of the doors was open, and peeking around the doorframe, Jane saw it most certainly was a large office but that Mike was just as certainly not in it.

Maybe it was for the best.

Screw that, she thought. It was *definitely* for the best. She stepped out of the corridor to gather her thoughts.

What had she thought was going to happen? What would have happened if she hadn't run into him and what in the name of God would have happened if she *had*?

No. It was better this way. It was—

The door clicked behind her and she whirled around.

Her lips parted and she felt her blood run cold.

He wasn't so far away this time; she could actually see his face. Every detail.

She opened her mouth to say something but no words came out. Not a sound. She couldn't even articulate his name.

Mike.

5. Demons

Five Demons

He was leaning back against the door, arms behind him as he still held the handle. His expression told her he hadn't been expecting this—hadn't been expecting her—but his hawk-like eyes sliced into her all the same.

He took in her changed appearance: her dirty blonde hair, given its volume by the number of tangles it held; her thin face, cheeks hollow under protruding cheekbones and jawline sharp enough to cut diamonds. She looked a little like an alien this far underweight, Jane knew. She kind of wished she'd saved her crazy stalking episode for a few weeks down the track. She didn't want Mike to see her like this—not this bad. Neither Dustin nor Steve had directly commented, but she'd seen herself in the mirror; she was a freaky-looking version of the Jane that used to be.

His eyes travelled over the rest of her and then back up to her face.

For another long—seemingly endless—minute, they stared at each other, both paralysed by shock.

Mike recovered first, although his voice wavered. "You're in Hawkins."

Still unable to speak, Jane nodded.

Her lack of explanation annoyed him, and his eyes darkened. "What are you doing here, El? Because if you think this is like 1989 and you don't have to explain yourself to me, I swear to God, I'll call the cops right now."

"Dustin broke me out," she nearly whispered.

"Dustin?" He took a step away from the door, appalled. "You've pulled *him* into your mess now?"

Jane countered his advance with a retreat, receding further into the room. "I didn't even know he was looking for me until last night," she

said carefully.

"Yeah?" There wasn't a trace of believing her in his tone. "He just appeared out of thin air and bundled you away to safety, did he?"

"Yes."

His contempt was so thick that his response was almost a sneer. "Sure, he did."

Jane didn't think she had the capacity to fight with him anymore, but she was telling the truth. "I didn't know!"

At the exclamation, some of Mike's venom subsided. "Yeah, well..." He looked like he really wanted to yell at her some more, but his next words were a tired admission. "That makes two of us."

What had happened in her years away? Jane understood Dustin not telling Mike about this—about her—but from the way he'd been talking last night, it was like the boys didn't even talk to each other anymore. She'd actually started to wonder if Lucas' family was one of the ones that had moved out of town until she saw his mother earlier on the street.

Jane licked her lips and leapt at her chance to explain—what she could, at least. "Steve found some evidence at the station. We think maybe it connects my arrest and some dodgy politics—"

"Your arrest?" Mike echoed, not so much angry now as provoked. "You mean Hop's murder? You mean that time they found you standing over him with a gun in your hand? How about that time you told me you weren't sorry?"

"Mike..." Jane opened her mouth, wishing she could give him a full explanation but knowing it was too soon.

"What, El?" he demanded. "What could you *possibly* say?"

She wavered. "It's..."

He shook his head, holding his hand up like he was ready to flatten her justification before it was even out of her mouth. "I swear to God,

if you say 'it's complicated'—"

"There's a lot you don't know!" she insisted desperately. "Some of it, I'm still figuring out..."

He nodded, talking over her, his voice remote. "Well, you figure it out, El, and fast. Because it won't be long before they track you down and put you back where you belong."

His words felt like a slap and without thinking about it, she erased the distance between them, staring up into his eyes. "Is there no part of you that thinks maybe something's changed, given that I'm here now trying to clear my name?"

At first, he seemed thrown by her question and their sudden proximity, his gaze exploring her closely for the first time in forever; her lips, the two tiny moles on her left cheek, the slope of her neck. When he finally returned to her eyes—he'd used to get lost in her bright, cognac eyes—he seemed to remember how uncaring they'd been the last time he stared into them.

"Something's definitely changed," he agreed, so softly it was almost a whisper.

He didn't elaborate, but Jane knew from his expressionless face what he meant:

I don't love you.

I don't trust you.

You should've stayed locked up.

Murderer.

Cheater.

She felt her heart screwing up inside her chest. She wanted to push that last one to the back of her mind, yet another deep, dark memory she kept locked in her inner vault of shame.

He didn't understand.

That didn't make it better, she knew, but there was more to the story. There was always more.

How had 1989 been the best and worst year of her life? And with her fucked up childhood, that was saying something.

His eyes were a desolate wasteland as she stared up into them. They were still standing so close, his familiar scent filling up her lungs and washing over her like the cool, revitalising spray of the sea, but he had never felt so far away. He'd been angry the last time she'd seen him, for sure, but it had been borne of heartbreak—absolute, total heartbreak.

He'd asked her as a child, *"What is wrong with you?"*

He'd asked her again on that night she couldn't bear thinking about.

Frozen in this moment now together, Jane could tell he was remembering it, too.

What is wrong with you?!" He was enraged. He threw the closest thing in his reach—a stack of textbooks—across the room, shaking he was so angry. But he was also crying. "How could you?"

She stood in the corner, feeling smaller than she'd ever felt but wanting to be even smaller. She knew the likelihood of childhood sweethearts working out was slim. That was an understatement. But Mike was Mike. They were El and Mike. It was different.

They'd been each other's first everything. They'd planned to be each other's last. She couldn't describe to him how much she still wanted that—it was indescribable. It was everything.

But now she had something he didn't; she'd taken something from him that she could never give back. She was his one and only.

Now, he was just...one.

She let him rage and scream and cry, not knowing what to say. There was nothing to say. It hadn't been a mistake or a misunderstanding. It had just happened. It just was. How could she even begin to explain? She just stood there, silent, head slightly bowed. Only once did he touch her.

He shook her, sobbing. "Look at me! Why aren't you looking at me?! El?!"

The sobs took hold of him and his whole body quaked as he fell to his knees in front of her, wrapping his arms around her waist and nestling his head against her stomach. He was done yelling. He was at a loss. He cried into her woolly sweater.

"How could you do this to me?"

How could she?

Jane had wondered that so many times after she was first shipped off. Maybe she'd made a mistake at the Park? Maybe she and Mike could have figured it out together? But, in the end, that was too much maybe.

She didn't deserve to miss him. She did this to him. Eventually, she forced herself to stop, because missing him just fed into her self-doubt, and she realised quickly enough that nothing could be done for her—the bars were a necessity and she was never leaving Central State. But there was no reason on Earth strong enough to justify dragging him down with her.

She hadn't been lying to Welling; she really had stopped missing Mike. She'd reached a point of giving up on a lot of things; herself, mostly. She was a lost cause and she was doing everyone she loved a favour by letting them forget about her and move on with their lives. She could just be a shell now. No reason to ruin the memory of a girl who'd once loved so strongly and been loved. Now, she could just fade away.

It was crazy how that had only been yesterday. It felt like a lifetime ago. It was amazing how much a little hope could change.

Maybe she'd spent so long believing it was better to give up and feel nothing because she'd seen other patients languish in misery and despair, the hopelessness driving them even more insane than they already were.

Not her, though. Not now. She wasn't insane. Despite everything, she knew she wasn't. That, she was determined to believe. And, more

than ever, that, she was desperate to prove. And her main reason for it was glowering at her right now like he had no idea who she was and didn't want to know.

Maybe he didn't.

But he would. Everyone would.

Because she had to know. For herself. For Joyce. For Hopper.

She took a nervous step toward him, which wasn't really possible considering how close they already stood. Mike's face clouded with distrust and he moved backwards instinctively, missing the door and hitting the wall beside it.

Jane took his hand as she stood almost flush against him and met his eyes, trying to ignore the glacial stare reflected back at her and the pain it caused her. She deserved it.

"I'm going to fix this, Mike."

His face contorted in sudden outrage, and she knew along the lines of what he was going to say.

Sometimes something so broken can never be fixed.

She pressed a finger to his mouth, determined to get this out. "Shhh. Please."

His eyebrows pulled together, looking halfway between furious and like he was terrified she was going to hurt him. Not physically, of course, but if history had taught him anything, it was not to place trust in her intentions.

Even though it broke her heart to see, Jane understood what he must be feeling. She'd never acted like a regular human on her best days, but toward the end especially, he hadn't been able to get a handle on her. Her temper alone had fluctuated like the brainwave activity of a grand mal epileptic. Did she love him? Did she not? Would she talk to him? Would she not? Was she lying to him? Again?

Hadn't she already hurt him enough?

How could she just turn up out of the blue like this and say something that was almost guaranteed to end in a blaze of fire on both their hearts?

He only wanted to protect his.

Jane's eyes saddened, her voice gentle as she told him, "I know I can't change the past and I know it seems right now like I could never do anything to make it better. I'm not going to ask for your forgiveness, Mike, but if there's even a shred of faith in me left inside you, you won't tell anyone that I'm here." Her gaze drifted to her finger, still pressed against his lips. His slightly parted, perfect lips. She felt her melancholy deepen. "When this is over, I don't expect anything from you. Really, I don't. How could I? But..."

His entire body went rigid as she leaned up, moving her hand around to the back of his neck and pulling him down to her, pressing a soft, lingering kiss to his cheek. Even when it was over, she delayed pulling away, instead treasuring every tiny detail about being so close to him again. His hair brushed the side of her face, the delicate skin of their temples touching; their breaths mingled. Their mouths were so close, just a tiny head-turn away. She could almost taste him again...

He pulled away, looking betrayed. How *dare* she? How dare she try to make him feel again when he'd spent four years hating himself for doing just that? *Wanting* to believe in her. Four years, wanting more than anything for everything that had happened—everything *she'd* done—to somehow be a massive misunderstanding. He'd never stopped. He couldn't. But the difference between 1989 and now?

The wanting didn't accomplish the believing.

"What are you doing?" he murmured throatily, the wariness and doubt and confusion all etched into his face. He withdrew his hand from hers, holding both of his up by his shoulders, as if in surrender.

Don't shoot, the gesture said. *Don't hurt me*.

But it also said, *Get off*.

I can't be touched by you right now.

Another moment of staring at him sadly, wanting nothing more than to just reach out and cup his cheek, Jane eased away, far enough that he didn't have to press against the wall anymore trying to get away from her.

He straightened, fixing his tie and his sweater, obviously trying to shake it off.

He'd learned to dress well in her absence; navy tie, pastel blue dress shirt, navy sweater with white buttons, grey trousers, and all brought together with coordinated tan leather shoes, belt, and watchband.

"I won't tell the police you're here," he said slowly.

Jane braced herself, knowing there was a 'but' coming.

"But the time of our lives where you knew me—that's over. Do you understand?"

"Better than you could possibly know," she whispered.

His guard faltered as he absorbed her words, but he seemed determined not to dwell on them. "Good."

"Can I just say one more thing?" she requested, surprised at how unabashedly pleading she sounded.

He noticed it too, but simply nodded. Once. Sternly. As if to punctuate that it really could only be *one*.

Jane took a deep breath. "I think they were trying to isolate me. I don't know why yet, or whom exactly, but I think they needed to isolate me to get whatever it was they wanted from me."

It was a new thought—one she hadn't even mentioned to Dustin or Steve yet—but it had been eating at her as a possibility since her shower earlier. Why else would they go to all the trouble of removing her from society? Why couldn't she have just stayed in Hawkins, continuing therapy with Ford? What was *so* important that Hopper had to die?

Jane still didn't know exactly what they'd done to her. She wasn't even sure if she was thinking about this the right way. She couldn't actually remember being instructed to do anything. But at the same time, what she did remember seemed wrong.

Remembering her first real conversation about the blizzard had given her the idea. She'd never questioned Ford's intentions before the transcripts; not his methods, not anything. He'd been a father figure. She'd trusted him. Hell, she'd trusted him enough that his putting his hand on hers when it was on her thigh hadn't shaken her. She hadn't even blinked. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that she hadn't even *noticed*. So what if there were other things she hadn't noticed?

It seemed a stretch that she wouldn't remember being told to lead a murderer to her father but what if it wasn't? Something like hypnosis seemed so much more feasible to her than that she'd temporarily snapped, led a man with no face to her father, watched him gun him down, then, overwhelmed by guilt and grief, taken responsibility for the murder. Well, she didn't doubt the guilt and grief part, but now that she really thought about it, head clearer than it had been in years, she'd never questioned why she was feeling guilty. She'd led the man to her father, knowing he was holding a gun; why wouldn't she feel guilty? It was her fault. But why did she do that? Why? It wasn't something she'd ever so much as considered before, which subsequently led Jane to ask:

Why. *THE FUCK*. Was that?!

Hopefully tonight would shine some light on that, if she and Steve found anything, but as things were now, Jane had to go off what, without evidence, was little more than a hunch, no matter which way she sliced it.

For a second, Mike looked like he might rebuke her for trying to pass blame, but then he considered what she said... And still found it equally infuriating.

"*Why* would they want you alone so badly they'd make you kill your father?" he demanded, and when he said it out loud, Jane realised it did sound pretty crazy.

Okay, really crazy. But not, unfortunately, as crazy as did his next question.

"And even if I could understand that, do you honestly expect me to believe that someone *else* told you to screw Scott Keegan at the Tigers' rally? Why the fuck would they care if you screwed Scott Keegan?!"

A legitimate question. And, in all fairness to his blazing fury, Jane did not know the answer. But it had worked. She'd slept with the former Tiger in the teacher's lounge when he turned up to show his support for his younger brother's team, effectively shattering Mike's trust when he came looking for her. And even though there was a brief window between that night and their conversation at the Park wherein Mike had tried to see past it, it wasn't something that could be undone.

But it was the same thing again. Why had she done that? She loved Mike and she barely knew Scott Keegan. He was a decent enough guy once you got past the jock exterior, but as if she would've thrown away all the years of devotion and laughter and *incredible* sex she had with Mike for a quick, sweaty fumble on the coffee counter with a 'decent enough guy.'

As if.

"Clearly they saw you as as much of an obstruction for them as Dad," she finally answered in a low voice. "They needed you out of the way."

"Oh! Is that what they needed?" The fake sudden comprehension was a bit much. "I'm sorry, I didn't realise I was the *lucky* one in all this!"

Jane refrained from rolling her eyes—it would be a bit insensitive, to be fair—and went to interrupt him, but Mike wasn't finished.

"Good thing you're explaining this to me now," he cracked on. "All this time, I thought the girl I loved inhumanly ripped my heart to pieces, but now I get it. Hop gets shot between the eyes and all I had to do was watch you rutting back against the sugar packets!"

Jane swallowed a lump in her throat as he sucked in air hard. She dropped her gaze to the floor, feeling his burn against her face.

She cleared her throat. "I'm not saying any of that," she finally said. "You have no idea how sorry I am for that night. I've never wanted anyone else, Mike. Thinking about him just makes me feel sick—"

He cut her off. "About four years too late, El."

She sighed. "I know."

She scrubbed a hand through her hair. It hurt. Damn, it was knotted. Her eyes stung, suddenly gleaming with tears. Mike didn't seem to realise their actual root cause but, with the number of times she'd cried over him, Jane didn't think it was exactly a lie to keep him in the dark.

"Listen to me," she implored solemnly. "I know we're not us anymore. I know I don't know you. I don't know what your life is like now or if you have someone new, but I'm here now because four years ago, a girl who looked like me loved you and she did a hell of a job convincing you she didn't." She shrugged. "All I want to do is find the people responsible."

"You really think they did this to you," he realised out loud, and Jane wondered if he was wondering if she was honestly insane.

She nodded earnestly. "And I think I'm starting to understand why."

"They wanted something from you?" he murmured, echoing her words from before. His eyes met hers. "Did they get it yet?"

Jane shook her head, offering a vague, ignorant kind of shrug. "I don't know." She bit her lip. "But I'm here now."

"You are here now," he agreed, his voice sounding far away.

Jane sunk back against the low bookcase beside her, feeling exhausted. She'd fantasised about her reunion with Mike so many times. Except in her fantasies, somehow everything had turned out all right, Hopper wasn't really dead, and she and Mike had shamelessly loud and passionate sex against every wall and on every flat surface

in his house. Of course, the longer she was in that nuthouse, plied out of her mind with meds and not nearly enough food to even think about physical exertion, the fantasies had become few and far between. In those early days, though... Jane almost sighed aloud contentedly. Absolute filth.

Completely unaware as to where her thoughts had wandered, Mike hung his head, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets and scuffing the floor with his shoe. He looked up again, mouth pinched downward ruefully.

"I've never fought with anyone the way I fight with you," he murmured.

He wasn't yelling at her now. He wasn't treating her like a stranger or telling her to get out of his sight or being cold. Jane didn't know what he was being. She wondered if he did.

All she knew as they both stood there silently in that office, gazes wandering from each other and into dust-covered memories of pain and doubt, was that the oceans were still there between them. She wondered if they'd ever part.

AN:

Okay, guys, it's the reunion you've all been waiting for. Please review and let me know where you think/hope Mike and El will go from here. There's still a lot that needs explaining and even more that needs proving, but I really hope this angsty hello holds up against your expectations. To those of you who have already shared your thoughts with me (shout out to you, ThisisMel - love you, girl!), thank you so much for making me glad I uploaded in the first place. I hope the reunion didn't let you down. See you guys with another update hopefully tomorrow, if everyone likes this one. You've got to let me know. -Inara x

6. The Game

AN:

Okay, guys, I'm sorry! I know it's been a few days, but here's Chapter Six. I'm not 100% happy with it to be honest, but I can't stare at it any longer willing a better way to write it to come to me! Please tell me what you think. I love you all, people who've reviewed. It really makes my day. Also, I felt really bad for how awful and depressing 'Demons' was, so even though this one isn't what I'd call 'light' either, there's a flashback to happier times in there for you. Don't worry, one day soon things will look promising again. Hope you like! -Inara x

Six The Game

Jane drifted from the Fause building like a ghost lost in time. Where was she headed? A part of her was dying to run back upstairs to Mike, but she knew more explaining at this point would just give him more things to doubt. It was the same as the night of the rally, when he'd yelled and cried and turned his room into a crash site in a jealous, heartbroken rage. She couldn't tell him then, and she couldn't tell him now. Granted, her reasons were different this time—this time, her consciousness didn't blindly flow around the problem like stream water around a rock—but the outcome was the same. You couldn't get blood out of a stone.

Holding her hood down tightly around her face, she started toward home when an uncomfortable chafing brought her up short.

Right. Underwear.

There wasn't a whole lot to downtown Hawkins. Besides the sandwich place and a couple of restaurants, everything was pretty much where she'd left it four years ago: RadioShack, Melvald's, Maggie's, The Hawk, Hunting & Camping. Mary Sue's was tucked into a side street behind Melvald's along with that pub Jane had never been into, the Hideaway.

This time of day, the store was quiet. Dead, actually. When Jane entered, she startled as the doorbell jingled above her, looking around wildly as if she'd set off an alarm. The sales clerk behind the counter glanced up. She had wild black cherry curls pinned up off her face and was wearing enamel cat eye frames. She smiled sympathetically.

"You need help there, honey?"

Jane realised she'd mistaken her wide-eyed, spooked expression for intimidation.

"Uh..." She fumbled with her jacket, pushing back her hood and unzipping the front. The other woman took in her bony frame through her glasses but said nothing.

Jane meant to say 'no, thank you.' She'd meant to just grab the first comfortable multi-pack off the rack and be done with it. But her eyes were drawn to a burst of vibrant colour behind the woman's head, where a mannequin was fitted with a royal blue garter set.

It was exactly the same colour...

"You think he'll like it?" Nancy asked uncertainly, her thumbs rubbing nervous circles against the blue lace in her hands. "You don't think he'd like the red one better?"

"I think you look stunning in blue," Jane answered confidently. "And he's going to love it regardless. He's going to lose his mind when he sees you."

Having finally landed his first big gallery partnership in Indianapolis, Jonathan was meeting Nancy back home for the weekend. What with her third year away at college and his ridiculous work schedule, she hadn't seen him in person in months, but they'd promised each other they wouldn't flake on this. Since breaking up in their first year out of school owing to too much time apart, they were both sticklers for the no-flake rule these days. Sometimes you had to lose the one you loved to realise what you were willing to do to get them back, she'd told Jane. For always.

Nancy smiled hesitantly, her insecurity plain on her face as she ran her fingers along the plunging neckline. "I just don't know..."

A loud groan sounded from the aisle beside them, and Mike appeared around the corner, looking as utterly appalled and impatient as any boy being dragged along on feminine errands for his sister would.

"Nancy," he said forcefully. "Just buy the one you're holding! You promised me five minutes and I've been standing around listening to my sister talk about sweetheart necklines and see-through panels for half an hour! It's a teddy. He'll love it for thirty seconds, then it'll be a scrap of discarded fabric on the floor. Just buy it!"

Nancy looked like she was about to argue then decided against it, disappearing in the direction of the register. With an amused smile, Jane watched her go, then rolled her attention back to her boyfriend, arching an eyebrow.

He shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not sorry. Thirty minutes, El. Thirty minutes! Do we really have to do makeup and perfume next?"

She suppressed a chuckle and caught sight of a skimpy high-waisted thong hanging in her purview. She turned, pretending to admire it, then ran her fingertip down the front, her nail scratching audibly against the silk.

She glanced over at Mike and saw his frown shift slightly, although he still looked uncomfortable. Now, he was just...uncomfortable and confused, like he didn't know if she was trying something and, if she was, whether it was working or not.

She pulled the hanger off the rack and sashayed over to him, her expression all-innocence. Ordinarily she hated women who sashayed—she even hated the word itself—but the look on Mike's face was priceless.

"Do you know why women wear makeup and perfume, Mike?" she purred, pressing the panties against his shirtfront.

These ones were red. And unabashedly luxurious.

He stared down at them wordlessly, his eyes glued to the tiny sparkling black beads threaded along the string-thin strap at the back.

Jane reached up, her free hand sliding into his hair, fingers knotting at the roots. But she didn't pull. She drew him down to her with her eyes. They brimmed with the promise of something unfathomable, and he followed

their spell like a man caught in a siren's thrall.

Their lips came close, but she anchored him just out of reach; gently, expertly. Keeping him at bay.

Her lips brushed his. Hers were soft and delicate; like feathers. She wanted him to feel all of her through just their kiss and the absence of her everywhere else.

Jane brought her lower lip into her mouth, wetting it with her tongue as he watched, hypnotised, and now she was satisfied because she knew all he could see was her.

"Do you?" she repeated, this time in a whisper.

Finally she released her hold on him and he sank into her, kissing her. His movements were soft; languid—like remembering every detail was imperative. He could taste her hot mouth and the green apple she'd eaten on the way here. He wanted to taste more of her.

He made a sound low in his throat that told her he didn't know. What was the question again?

Jane smirked and broke away slowly, letting his eyes refocus on her face. His lips were still parted; his fingers still cradled her face, curtained by her hair. He looked like he had no understanding of what had just happened, but he loved her.

And then the dreamlike haze shattered as she answered for him abruptly, "Because we're ugly and we smell bad."

Grinning and hanging up the panties, Jane headed away from him down the aisle in search of Nancy, and he stared after her like she'd just told him she'd crashed his car.

"Oh, come on!"

"Honey?"

Jane blinked. The sales clerk—looking at her nametag, Jane saw her name was Bee—was leaning further over the counter, trying to get her attention.

"Pardon? Oh, sorry."

"You spaced out for a minute there." Bee smiled. "Bit overwhelming for you?"

Jane glanced around the store and pushed her fists into her jacket pockets. "I just haven't been shopping in a while."

"Someone to impress?" the older woman teased. She wasn't old at all; just older than Jane by comparison. Maybe early thirties.

Jane considered the question. The likelihood that she'd be in a state of undress in the near future wasn't just low, it was non-existent. Mike had said it before—she really didn't know him anymore. The thought that some other girl could be out buying slinky lingerie with him in mind made her stomach heave, but that was one of the consequences of confessing to murder: your boyfriend finding someone who *hadn't* confessed to murder.

But the question stood. She wasn't getting her hopes up or anything, but his effort to be cold had quickly dissolved into vindictive anger. People didn't get that angry when they didn't care. Mike didn't.

She sighed and replied to Bee, "Probably a bit soon for that. But maybe next time." Like lingerie could make it all better.

Then again, if memory served, it could accomplish a lot of things.

"In that case..." Bee came out from behind the counter. "What *can* I do for you, love?"

Jane pulled out her wallet and handed her Dustin's gift card. "I just need a few essentials. I haven't exactly been living the high life since I've been away, so something that doesn't make me want to kill myself would be appreciated."

Bee nodded in feminine understanding and asked, "We've got comfort or comfort with an asterisk?"

Jane decided she liked this woman. "Have you got anything that says, 'now I'm back, I'm going to stop eating like a skeleton and scaring myself in the bathroom mirror'?"

Her eyes travelling over Jane's protruding sternum again, Bee nodded. "We'll grab you a couple of sizes, love. Don't you worry."

Bee proved to be extremely helpful, and thanks to Dustin's somewhat awkward but well-placed generosity, Jane left Mary Sue's with a bundle of mixed cotton briefs, an assortment of sporty thongs for getting her fitness back in check, and, just for the days when her ass was looking particularly sad, a violet pair of Brazilian-cut bottoms. And socks. Could never have enough socks.

It was amazing, how long the two women talked. Jane knew it wasn't the smartest idea but Bee—full name Beatriz, as Jane had found out—was so warm and forthcoming that her conversation was difficult to resist.

She'd grown up in upstate New York but had moved to the city for college. She'd hated it, saying it was just bursting at the seams with people and no matter where you went, you couldn't have a quiet day. So, she'd dropped out of college—hating pharmacy anyway—and just waitressed from town to town, state to state. She honestly loved meeting people, Jane realised. Just not in the cities themselves. And when she finally reached Hawkins, it felt like as good a town as any to stay for a while. Good people, she said. It was just a town of truly good people.

So that's why she had no idea who Jane was. She'd only moved here after the fact, and knowing Hawkins folk, no one had told her anything because no one liked to talk about the bad apples once they were flushed out.

Jane kept her sharing fairly minimal. When the conversation swayed away from frills and lace and cheeky ribbon ties, she explained how she spent her teenage years here when she moved in with her dad, but she'd been away the last few years. Bee guessed college, considering how exhausted and starved she looked—like she was living off packet noodles or something. Jane had let her believe it.

Bee's last question reminded Jane she really did have to go:

"What are you going to do, now that you're back?"

Jane pondered how to frame her response to that for a moment, then simply smiled.

"I should go." She looked out the shop window. "Can you believe it's getting dark already?"

Bee followed her gaze and murmured, "I kind of like it, though. Dark or light, you know nothing's gonna hurt you in Hawkins. I could walk around the streets all night and nobody would lay a finger on me."

Ignoring the personal irony in that, Jane pushed herself to her feet. They'd been sitting on the step outside the changing rooms, a dark silver velvet curtain brushing against Jane's back. She helped Bee up, too.

"We owe all that to Hawkins' finest, keeping our streets safe for us," she drivelled, although she meant it when Steve popped into her mind. Truly Hawkins' finest.

Zippping her jacket back up and taking her bag, she waved her way out of the store, stopping only for a moment on the stoop to survey the sidewalks outside. Pretty empty. Got to love small towns.

Jane got back to the apartment a little before seven to find Dustin waiting at the door.

"Do you know how long I've been standing here?" he demanded. "An *hour*, Jane! What would have happened if you hadn't come home? The hospital knows you're missing, by the way. It's only a matter of time before word reaches Hawkins."

Jane shrugged off her jacket and hung it on one of the hooks in the entryway.

"I'm sorry," she said honestly. "I lost track of time. It's kind of been a hell of a day."

"You're telling me." He led the way into the kitchen and cracked himself a beer. "I spent my whole shift waiting for them to come take me away. It was like everyone was watching everyone today. Stressed me the hell out."

Jane watched him as he sat himself down on one of the barstools and rubbed his face tiredly. He did look exhausted. She realised how selfish she'd been today, getting caught up in social chat with a stranger because it felt good to pretend to be normal again when her friend had literally committed a crime for her not twenty-four hours before. A crime he could go to prison for, no less. And on barely any sleep, he'd had to re-enter that snake pit this morning and pretend everything was fine while hoping to God no one saw through him.

"I'm sorry," she said again finally, more weight to it this time. "I wasn't thinking. I'll do better."

"I just want you to be safe, Janie." He pulled out the other stool from under the bench for her. "We just got you back."

She obliged him, sitting down. She couldn't look straight at him when she admitted, "I really missed you, you know." She set her jaw stubbornly as tears welled up. "That place was awful. It would make sense that it was you out of everybody who would get me out. You always see the best in people."

Dustin smiled impishly and Jane could tell she wasn't going to like what he was about to say.

"I guess it helped you didn't cheat on *me* with Scott Keegan, hey?"

If it were possible, Jane's tears of gratitude would have instantaneously dried up. Bastard. That was twice in one day he'd said something that no one else would say.

She looked away. "He told you about that."

"Come on, you know you were hoping he would." He took another swig of his beer. "You wanted all of us to hate you. Didn't mean I believed you."

Jane's eyebrows pulled together, wondering if he'd misunderstood. "D, I *did* cheat on Mike."

"Oh, I know," he said. "I meant, I didn't believe you wanted to." At her stupefied expression, he shook his head fondly, as if saying 'Classic Jane.' "Come on, Janie, you loved that guy like he was the only guy

on Earth. You still do. You expect me to believe you just stopped and treated him like the shit under your shoe because he just didn't do it for you anymore? I'm not an idiot."

"You're calling Mike an idiot?"

He shook his head. "He was too close to the whole thing. But it was the same with Hopper. You think Steve brought home those transcripts and I just suddenly decided to start looking for you? It took a while, I know, but why do you think I majored in Psychology, girl? I've been a man on a mission since they arrested you."

"D..." Jane really didn't know what to say to that. She leaned her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes.

"I know, I know." He moved her for a second to wrap his arm around her shoulders. "I'm one of a kind."

"A gentleman and a scholar," she murmured, relishing in the strength and surety of his arm around her. She really had missed him.

"Okay!" Steve burst through the front door, yelling down the hallway, "I have prime rib, I have butter, I have artichokes. Three guesses what we're having for—oh, now! What kind of adorable scene do I see before me?"

Jane felt Dustin swivel his head around and he taunted his roommate, "Nothing you can get in on, Steve."

"Please, I think Brown Eyes'll be the judge of that."

Jane didn't know what was happening; one second, she was happily cocooned under Dustin's wing and the next, she was being spun around like a ragdoll in Steve's arms.

"Stop!" she cried out, faltering when he put her down, too dizzy to stand. He caught her but she shoved him off, grabbing at the kitchen bench instead for support. "What is this, a lame nineties rip-off of *Happy Days*?"

The boys shrugged, and Steve turned to Dustin. "Well, if it was, I'd be Fonzie."

"Oh, you think you'd be Fonzie?" Dustin was on his feet. "Of course, you think *you'd* be Fonzie!"

"Guys!" Four years in a mental asylum and Jane had seen inmates acting less crazy than this. "Can we *please* act like grown-ups?" It was almost impossible to believe they were respectable members of society in their day-to-day lives.

The puffed chests reluctantly deflated and they started about helping her in the kitchen, pausing only to clink bottles when Steve fetched himself a beer out of the fridge.

By the time dinner and clean-up were over, it was about eight thirty, and, as wonderfully delightful as the dinner conversation had been, Jane had been watching the clock above the oven the whole time. As soon as it hit nine, they were leaving.

She knew it was stupid—her personal vendetta speaking, no more—but a part of her really wanted Ford to see her coming. She wanted him to know she wasn't going to stop until she burned him and his sick little experiment—whatever it was—to the ground. She wanted him to be afraid.

That was what she'd wanted to tell Bee earlier, when she'd asked what she was going to do:

Crucify the sinners. Make them bleed.

Jane knew she wasn't even close to being in a position yet where she could do that. At the moment, it just sounded laughable. But she would get there. She wouldn't stop until she got there.

They'd killed her father. They were going to pay.

And, if they hadn't, they had a lot of explaining to do.

"Okay," she addressed Steve. "Time to rob some town secrets."

"Wait, what?" Dustin's hands were full of dessert ingredients, but he swung around. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Oh." Jane tried to look innocent. "Did I not tell you—"

He cut her off. "No, you didn't tell me and you're not going!"

She grimaced, eyes moving to Steve for back-up. "Steve?"

He looked like he wished she'd won the argument on her own, but sighed. "D, we need information out of Ford's office."

"So, *we'll* go!" Dustin insisted, gesturing madly between himself and Steve. "*She* can't get caught doing something illegal! Could you imagine—"

"I understand," Steve said. "But we don't really even know what we're looking for." As Dustin swayed on his feet, he added, "Besides, look at you. You're run off your feet. Take the night and recharge. We'll fill you in on what we find in the morning."

Dustin looked between him and Jane and back again. "Do you at least have a plan? What about cameras?"

Steve was unbothered. "Doesn't have any. I cased the place earlier today; made an appointment for next week to have a yarn about the stress of the job. Not too surprising—this *is* Hawkins, and the guy's acting like he's got nothing to hide. Janie'll just take care of the locks and we'll be in and out."

"And if someone catches you?" Dustin demanded.

Jane felt herself getting impatient. "I'll take care of it."

He turned his attention on her. "Oh, yeah? And how are you gonna do that? Keeping in mind that people thinking you killed somebody is what got us into this mess in the first place!"

She rolled her eyes. "I meant, I'd knock them out and make them think they dreamed the whole thing."

"Is that something you can do now?" Steve asked, clearly misunderstanding her meaning. "Hypnotise people?"

She frowned at him. "No, genius. I like to leave *that* to the experts. I just meant I'd put them somewhere they'd think they fell asleep."

"Oh." He processed that for a moment. "So, not a perfect plan, then."

"No," she agreed. "But we don't really have a better one." She turned back to Dustin, wanting to reassure him. "D, I know this is hard, but we'll be careful. We need to do this."

"Will you at least wait a couple hours?" he begged. "The last movie is on at nine. It'll finish around eleven. Streets should clear out after that."

Jane glanced at Steve, considering it, but ultimately shook her head. "Actually, we were hoping to use the hordes of rowdy teenagers as a cover. With them heading into the movie, nobody's going to notice us walk straight through a doorway down the side street. It's not like we're going to be standing outside with a lock pick or anything."

Dustin wasn't happy, but in the end, he conceded. Steve got changed into dark civilian garb and hid his tell-tale hair under a knit cap. Jane grabbed a few essentials, and then they were climbing down the fire escape and out onto the street.

The Hawk was a point of activity as people arrived to buy their tickets. It was a Saturday night, so that came as no surprise. Jane remembered many a Saturday night spent curled up against Mike in the dark movie theatre. Skirting around the crowd and down the side street, however, there was no one to be found.

Ford's office was entirely dark on both levels, and as they approached, without faltering in her stride, Jane focused on the locked door and then closer, finding the latch and deadbolt with her mind. Both retracted in unison as she reached for the knob, and she and Steve slipped into the waiting room as easily as they would their own home. More easily, in fact.

Jane knew this building like the back of her hand, so she made a beeline for the stairs and ran up to Ford's actual office as if they weren't plunged in impenetrable darkness. She could hear Steve feeling his way up, so she made sure the blinds on the three windows on this level were shut, then switched on her flashlight. It was small—even with the blinds drawn, she didn't want to create too much light—but it was enough to sculpt a hazard-free path for Steve into

the room.

"Okay, so..." He fumbled for the right words. "You wanna...?"

In answer to his question, a unified chorus of clicks rang out around the room, every drawer and filing cabinet unlocking at once.

Jane turned to Steve and, to polish off the display, switched on his flashlight for him as he pulled it out of his belt.

"Let's do this," she said, and they took to opposite sides of the room, each starting on a cabinet.

Steve groaned and buried his face in his hands, sitting on the floor with piles of papers stacked separately in front of him, the bottom drawer of his second cabinet empty beside him.

"Three hours!" he grumbled. "Three hours, and nothing!"

"What, did you expect this to be easy?" Jane teased. "Aren't you a cop?"

In truth, she was feeling a bit disheartened herself. She was ahead of him, on the fifth and final cabinet. She'd already checked Ford's desk and bookshelves as well, and knowing she had only two drawers left to find even a trace of shady activity had her wondering about their next move. If they found nothing, where did they go from here? Would it really come down to her kidnapping Ford and torturing him for information in somebody's garage, way off the beaten track? As tempting as it was, that *did* sound crazy.

Steve sighed and dropped his hands into his lap, smacking the papers in front of him. "Maybe we missed something."

"We haven't missed anything," she assured him. "We've combed this place, top to bottom. If nothing's in that cabinet, pack it away and come help me with these last two drawers. I'm learning a lot about townsfolk I never wanted to know."

"Should we feel bad about this?" he queried, beginning to put documents away in the order he'd found them. "Some of this is really

private stuff."

"We already knew Mrs Wheeler thinks Ted is a couch potato," Jane brushed him off casually. "At least, this way, we know no one else is a candidate and that I'm the only one who's been prescribed the Periphax. And remember, if you hadn't read my transcripts, I wouldn't be here right now."

"About that," he said hesitantly. "Janie, the Periphax, the anti-depressants... I just don't know why you didn't tell me."

"I didn't tell anybody," she admitted after a moment, still looking through documents and not looking at him. "I didn't even tell Mike."

"But *I* was—" He cut himself off. What had he been going to say? *Your big brother? Your family?*

She sighed and rested the papers on top of the drawer, meeting his eyes. "You think I wanted you to know there was something wrong with me?" Her voice was small, and it cracked.

"Janie..." Steve looked like his heart was breaking for her, like the last thing he wanted was for her to feel like she couldn't tell him about herself. "There's something wrong with everybody. But if you think not being okay after that horror show you went through made you wrong in some sort of way... You got no idea what really wrong people are like. And they sure as hell are nothing like you."

Jane opened her mouth to reply but was unsure of what she was going to say, when the floor creaked and she and Steve threw themselves behind the desk in an effort to scramble out of view, clicking off their flashlights and holding their breaths.

But nobody came. Maybe it was just the wind. They lay there for five minutes, waiting for somebody to come in and catch them. But there was nothing. Not even footsteps.

Peeking out from behind the solid mahogany, her eyes adjusting to the dark, Jane could confirm that it must have just been the building shifting on its foundations. It was an old building, after all. She clicked her flashlight back on and climbed over Steve to get back to

her filing cabinet, but he didn't follow.

"Janie..." he murmured.

"What?" she replied carelessly, not really listening. "Get back here and help me, you lazy lummoX."

"No, Janie..."

She looked up. He was lying on his side, staring across the room with his flashlight beam pointing directly at the bare coffee table on the far side of the couches.

"What?" she demanded, not understanding the relevance of it.

"Does that carpet look level to you?" he asked in response, and Jane immediately forgot what she'd been reading about.

She lay down beside him, seeing what he was talking about. It was very slight, the difference, but she could see how he'd noticed it; there was a definite edge running along the carpet between the two closest table legs, too disconnected to be a seam. She crawled over and shoved the coffee table aside, sticking her fingernails into the tiny gap and pulling. The carpet square came away, revealing a wooden board underneath. She lifted that, too.

A floor safe.

"Oh, Steve, you're a genius," she whispered.

"I thought I was a lummoX," he retorted in good humour, coming to kneel beside her. "It's a spin combination lock. You think you can handle one of these?"

"I guess we'll find out."

She leaned her head into the hole, pressing her ear against the cold metal and closing her eyes. Listening. Blocking everything else out and listening.

It wasn't a matter of listening for clicks with her ear. She was no expert on regular safe-cracking, but she knew they listened for clicks

or something. She couldn't really explain it, her way. It was like listening to the physical space between everything. As she started to turn the combination dial to the left with her mind, she could feel the spindle turning the wheel cam, and the space between the drive pin and the first wheel fly diminishing. She waited until she'd picked up all the wheels to listen for the absence of metal in the first wheel—the notch that would determine the first number in the combination. She found it.

"Steve, write down the number," she ordered, not opening her eyes. Light flashed against her eyelids as she felt him lean over her, studying the dial.

Then he stumbled away in search of a pen.

"You got it?" she verified, not wanting to lose her concentration on the space between the wheels and the fence.

He crawled back to her, his words slightly distorted as he spoke around a pen lid. "Got it. Sixty-four."

Jane returned her full attention to the safe. Spinning the dial to the right, she waited. It made three revolutions before she felt the notch of the second wheel closing in on the overhead fence. She stopped the dial.

"Number," she told Steve, and he leaned over again and recorded it.

"Thirty-five."

The final number came up after two revolutions to the left, and, after getting Steve to take this one down as well, Jane turned the dial back to the right until she felt resistance. All the notches were lined up with the fence above. She jolted the dial just a little further and felt the bolt retract. So that's how it worked; the fence fell into the aligned notches under the force of its own weight and freed the bolt to slide open unhindered.

Speaking of unhindered.

Jane sat up and used the handle to pull the safe open.

Steve shone his flashlight over her shoulder. "Documents?"

"And then some," she whispered, pulling out a stack of patient files all stamped with 'candidate' at the top. She gave half to Steve and told him to check their prescription logs. As she flipped through her stack, uncertainty dawned. "No Periphax."

"Doesn't look like it," he confirmed. "No mention of a ROOM trigger either."

"Maybe I was wrong." Jane felt her heart sink. What if she had been wrong, about everything? What if, sleazy as he was, Ford wasn't her own personal demon who'd single-handedly ruined her life in an attempt to use her for sinister purposes?

It really did sound ridiculous when she thought about it. Maybe Mike was right.

"Whoa, hold up." Steve leaned in closer to her, showing her one booklet in particular. It wasn't a patient file. It was a psych report... for a computer game.

Jane muttered as she skimmed the first page, "Obsessive mindset toward continuing in eighty-seven percent of Focus Group Seven... Difficulty finishing or taking breaks... Markedly reduced: appetite and thirst while playing... Rapid adjustment to game's violence even among inexperienced players, see Subject Ninety-One-B...?"

They stared at each other and Jane's expression screwed into one of utter confusion and incomprehension.

"Could this conspiracy *get* any weirder?"

"Wait, look at the top," Steve insisted, and Jane looked to where he was pointing.

Entertainment Division Head: Bradley Spieler, it read.

Major Projects Supervisor: Katrina Vice

Project Manager: Michael Wheeler

Jane stared at the paper, unsure about anything and everything right now.

Mike was only first year out of college. How could he be a project manager for a major gaming titan already? And what the hell was his name doing on a report that basically confirmed Fause's newest project was a creepy brainwashing game that glued people to their monitors? This was all starting to sound like something out of some crappy spy thriller, where the hero had to race against time to stop the whole population from being brought under some evil megalomaniac's control.

"He couldn't know about this," Jane breathed. "Right?"

Steve looked back at her like he wished he had something more reassuring to say. "At this point, Brown Eyes, nothing would surprise me."

Jane shook her head wildly, knowing there was no way it could be true... Desperate for evidence to prove it.

She knelt back over the safe.

There wasn't much else in there. A bit of cash, a few certificates of accreditation to practice. Her eyes stopped on a folder she'd recognise anywhere, tucked neatly away into the side of the safe. Worn-in brown leather and hand-stitched Cornell emblem in the top right-hand corner.

It was Welling's.

Well, not actually Welling's, she realised as she opened the folder to reveal years-old documents inside. But identical to Welling's.

The documents, it turned out, made up the originals of her own patient file. No wonder she hadn't found it in the cabinets. It reassured her fractionally that, while her whole situation and her sanity were in doubt, Ford still clearly had something to hide.

The originals of her transcripts were here, and all copies of her prescriptions for anti-depressants and the Periphax. She studied the transcript that was stamped with 'candidate' again.

"I don't understand," she murmured. "If there were a bunch of us labelled 'candidate', why am I the only one he prescribed the Periphax to?"

"I wouldn't see that as a step backward, Janie," Steve replied, and at her querying expression he explained, "A doctor prescribing a particular drug to only one patient with pretty regular symptoms... That's weird. Even in a small town like Hawkins."

"Maybe I'm just the only crazy within city limits," she mumbled despondently.

He snatched the booklet from her, tapping the paper. "*And* the only one on—what was it?—Phluctine?"

Jane shrugged. "It's nothing—that's just Prozac in Austria."

"Um, no," he rejected. "Ignoring for a second the fact that you never questioned why you were getting Austrian drugs in the American Midwest—"

Jane tried to interrupt, "Because they were cheaper over the counter as the generic brand—"

He shut her down. "Jane, when have you ever heard of German imports being cheaper or generic? This isn't Aldi."

"We don't...have an Aldi," she finished dumbly, realising that he was right. *She* had been outsmarted by *Steve*. In about two seconds. But wait. "I said Austrian, not German."

"Oh, forgive me," he said sarcastically. "Because, in these circumstances, it makes *such* a huge difference." When she didn't argue back, he continued, "Anyway, back to my original point. Ignoring the whole import situation, Phluctine is *not* Prozac in Austria."

"Yes, it is," she disagreed immediately. "Ford told me."

"Oh, well, if Ford told you!" He let the mockery hang in the air as he got to the main point of this whole conversation. "Fluctine is Austria's Prozac. Not Phluctine."

Not hearing a difference, Jane just looked grumpy.

Steve sighed. "It's a homophone, Jane. Sounds the same but spelt different, with a whole different meaning."

"How do you know all this?" Jane demanded, feeling like she was being given an English lesson at the most inopportune time.

He shrugged. "It's like knock-off designers. They sell a fake Chanel bag as Chanel, a customer goes around happy as a pig in shit until the stitching starts to come apart."

"Don't talk bags to me," Jane snapped, having experienced enough of the ridiculous for one night.

"I'm just saying, the Doc prescribed Phluctine to you as if it were Fluctine," he said. "But since the misspelling makes it a different name altogether, there's no way of knowing if he was even prescribing an anti-depressant to you in the first place."

Jane thought about this. "But it made me happier."

Again, he shrugged. "Okay, maybe it did. I'm just saying, there's no 'Phluctine' on the internet. I checked."

"When did you check that?" she demanded.

"The minute I read it off your transcripts," he replied evenly. "I wanted to know what my little sister was taking."

She sighed, scrubbing a hand over her eyes. "Steve..."

"I'm not mad at you for not telling me," he averred quietly. "I just wish you had."

Jane peeked out at him through splayed fingers as he returned to probing through the psych report on Fause's mystery game.

He was right, as he was disturbingly proving to be about almost everything at this point. Jane being the only patient to be prescribed foreign drugs that clearly weren't even marketed in their own country *was* weird. Like America wasn't a land brimming with *legitimate* drug

giants.

It *could* have something to do with her whole theory about isolation and indoctrination. It *could*. It had to.

"Janie..." Steve trailed off after just her name, staring up at her in horror.

"What is it?" she demanded, but garnering no response, she ripped the document out of his hands and brought it up close to her face with her flashlight.

Focus Group Seven, it read. Subject Ninety-One-B.

Displayed unchecked aggression against on-screen entities. Was not receptive to eating or sleeping breaks, and refused water whenever offered. Appeared to have no appreciation or respect for time passing. Ignored any suggestion to pause the game.

At Level Twenty-Seven, subject succumbed to the War Machine.

"This is ridiculous." Jane shook her head. "How could they make a game so addictive that people don't even notice days passing?"

Steve's face remained sober. "Jane, past tense. Look at the bottom."

Jane did.

Subject terminus: 10/14/1993

Jane looked up. "Oh, you don't think—"

"Look at the name," Steve directed, and she found it near the top of the page, just above 'candidate.'

She felt the world slow around her, and her stomach dropped.

Claudia Henderson

"Dustin," she whispered, covering her mouth in disbelief. And suddenly she was too angry to even think about her personal vendetta against Ford. This was bigger than she'd ever thought to

imagine.

People were *dying*. Lovely, kind, regular people.

She was going to kill Ford. She decided that, then and there. Not yet, of course. She still needed him to figure out what the *hell* was going on here. But she was going to, in the end. In the end, even if it meant she had to spend the rest of her days in a maximum security prison, she was going to kill him. She was going to kill everybody involved in this vile, abhorrent experiment. Maybe it wasn't the government, maybe it was; she didn't care.

They were all going to die.

"We have to talk to Mike," she said, and for the first time in her life, she could see herself properly hurting him.

She could see herself truly becoming a stranger.

AN:

Haha Thoughts? Feelings? I know, it's a bit cheesy and trashy in parts, but I promise it'll all come together and make sense in the end. Get yourselves ready for a big confrontation with Mike. El's out for blood, even if it's his. I'll update again probably Thursday arvie (so, for all my friends up there in the Northern Hemisphere, it'll probably be a little earlier). Talk to me, guys. I'm excited to hear it all. :P -Inara x

7. We Used to Be Friends

Seven We Used to Be Friends

Tick.

Jane stared at the clock above the oven, fingers interlaced into a chinrest in front of her. Her elbows were cold against the countertop—all of her was cold—but she needed the window open. She needed to cool down, inside. She could feel her hands shuddering in anticipation like muzzled rabid dogs, snarling to be let loose on somebody's throat. Her heart pounded against her sternum, hard as a battering ram. She could almost feel the blood in her eyes.

Tick.

She'd been home for hours, but she could still feel herself practically vibrating with rage. Was it rage alone, though?

Tick.

Rage, confusion, mistrust... What did it matter? She was so scared that Mike was somehow an accessory to this barbarity, she couldn't see straight. And Dustin...

Tick.

Oh, Dustin.

She and Steve had arrived home in the wee hours to contented snores and had resolved to tell him everything in the morning. No point disrupting his first decent night's sleep in forty-eight hours when they couldn't do anything about their news until daylight anyway. As much as Jane had wanted to march over to Mike's house straightaway and interrogate him under the steely gleam of a knife's edge, Steve had convinced her that they might find it a little difficult explaining that to Mrs Wheeler in her pyjamas. Besides, Steve had added, neither of them knew off the top of their head whether Mike even lived at home anymore or not.

So, Jane waited. And waited and waited.

Steve had crashed out on the couch waiting with her, and maybe he'd had the right idea, for telling Dustin the truth and in general. Lack of sleep didn't exactly work wonders for the brain's functionality, and now, more than ever, Jane needed to be sharp.

There was something so mollifying and rhythmic about the boys' snoring. They would have been synchronised, if it weren't for Dustin's slight acceleration every five breaths or so. He'd slow down almost immediately, but by then the harmony was broken.

The noise made Jane long to sleep—not because she couldn't stand it but because it reminded her of nights growing up when Hopper's snores had wrapped around her like a bulletproof winter coat. Layers upon layers upon layers of protection. Well, not protection exactly, but presence—tender, loving presence. She'd never slept more soundly than those nights she could hear him through the walls. She remembered Joyce joking about it a number of times at the breakfast table—saying the house was so frail, he could shake down the walls—but she never complained. Maybe she was comforted by it, too.

But that was then.

Now, Jane couldn't sleep.

Tick.

If she slept, she'd dream. And she couldn't take any more dreams right now.

She was weak, she knew, for being afraid to remember more. She'd have to eventually, and the longer she left it, the more she'd undoubtedly regret taking her time. There was just something so tragic about it, so heartbreaking. She'd looked up to Ford. It wasn't as if she'd loved him—he was only her doctor after all—but he'd been a father figure. She'd trusted him. In a way, for anyone outside her immediate family, that was even more difficult to achieve.

Tick.

His office had been a sanctuary; her favourite armchair in the world, a calming view of the green, swaying tops of street trees outside the

window. His belly laugh and his secretary, Tina, and the zebra paintings on the walls. He'd loved zebras.

The large square wall clock, ticking away the seconds—dependable background noise, there with her every moment, every step of the way.

Tick.

"You don't want to disappoint me, Jane. Do you?" His hand was warm on hers, anchoring her. He made her feel so safe; his certainty buoyed her certainty.

She stared fretfully back at him. "No. I would never!"

He smiled. "Good girl. So, what are you going to do?"

"Go to the school," she answered immediately, echoing his instructions exactly from before. "Find the assistant."

He nodded. "And then?"

"Introduce myself."

"Jane." He sat forward, pressing his hand down more firmly over hers. She was held captive by his forceful grey eyes. "This is very important. It cannot go wrong. I need you to promise you'll do whatever it takes to convince him."

"Whatever it takes," she whispered, nodding, bowing her head in apology. She needed to take this more seriously. Whatever it takes.

He squeezed her hand painfully and she looked up in surprise. He caught her gaze and locked onto it.

"Whatever. It. Takes," he enunciated, and she nodded again.

"Whatever it takes."

Tick.

The assistant.

Jane blinked.

Scott Keegan.

She lifted her head, eyes screwing up against the early morning glare.

The *mayor's* assistant.

Obviously, Hawkins' former mayor, Arthur Culkin—not the lying eel who held office now.

Jane rubbed her eyes, checking the clock.

Seven twenty. She'd only fallen asleep for an hour or so.

Steve was still passed out beside her, breathing through his gaping mouth now as he lay so close to the end of the couch that he was very nearly falling off it. Jane was tempted to throw marshmallows at him—that mouth was like a black hole—but she had questions far more pressing than possible Heimlich practice.

She scrambled over to him, shaking him awake. He mumbled nonsensically, trying to roll over.

"Steve?" She slapped him a little. "Steve!"

"Wha-" His head jerked up, his hair closely resembling a cockatoo's crest feathers. "What?"

"Arthur Culkin," Jane said forcefully. "Where is he? What happened to him?"

He frowned. "Died of a heart attack. Why?"

"When?" she demanded.

He shook his head, still groggy. "I don't know... Before your arrest. Not long before, though." He sat up, groaning and stretching his back. "Again, why?"

"How did I not know about this?" Forgetting for a moment everything else, Jane found herself banging on Dustin's bedroom door, pacing

back and forth between the couch and the kitchen until he stumbled out, bleary-eyed and swaddled up in his incredibly cosy-looking pyjamas. They looked like a set his mother would've bought for him.

His mother.

Jane's pacing wavered.

She glanced at Steve. Although he'd spent the last two minutes looking at her like she'd lost the plot, he seemed to read what she was thinking off her face. Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head.

Not like this.

"Guys, would you *please* tell me what's going on?" Dustin yawned, padding over to the stove to boil some water.

"Jane's asking about the mayor," Steve answered honestly.

"What about him? He's Mr Perfect Asshole," Dustin replied, rifling through tins to find his coffee. "Everyone's favourite man on the street! If only everyone knew he was a lying son of a bitch, he probably wouldn't get re-elected... Wouldn't put it past him to try though, the slippery—"

"Not Fake Hopper. Arthur Culkin!" Jane groaned, trying to explain. "I think I remember why Ford sent me after Scott Keegan—or, not exactly why, but why some dirt on him might have been of use."

The boys just looked at her expectantly.

She threw up her hands. "You know, when we fucked at the rally—Ford told me to do that! He said to do 'whatever it takes'." Mimicking his deep, high-handed voice, Jane shuddered.

"Whatever it takes to do what?" Steve asked.

She shrugged, racking her brain. Even though she now remembered that pleasant little exchange, it had still been a dream—and dreams, for her, always started to fade fairly quickly. "I don't know. It's hazy. Maybe Ford didn't even say anything else in the first place, whether I remember it or not. All I know is he just said that it was important

and that I needed to convince the assistant."

"Convince him to...?" Steve trailed off, unable to say it out loud in regard to her. But then his brow furrowed. "But wasn't that the 'whatever it takes' part? You had to do that to convince him of something else? Jesus, that's like..."

"Prostitution?" Dustin offered up. When they both glared at him, he held his hands up. "Sorry! *Brainwashed* prostitution."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Okay, so, Scott was all about reliving his glory days where he was the high school star who girls threw themselves at and I gave him that...in exchange for something only his grown-up, daily grind self could give me? Is that what we're saying?"

"I mean, it's still all conjecture." Dustin sunk down next to Steve, sipping his coffee. "But it sounds more likely than the alternative of you, you know, actually wanting to bone Scott Keegan." At his tactless wording, Steve blanched and Jane narrowed her eyes.

Desperate to redirect the conversation, Steve queried, "Only question is, what did Ford want with the mayor's office?"

"Well, obviously for his pal to take over it," Jane mumbled, stealing Dustin's coffee for a sip. He pushed her away to get her own. Stove-bound, she mused over her shoulder, "I think the better question is, was he pushing for an all-out takeover or did he just need information?"

"Information Scott could give?" Dustin sounded doubtful. "I mean, he's an all right guy, but everyone knows he only got that position because of Daddy Moneybags. That's why he was fired as soon as Fake Hopper took office."

"That was why, was it?" Now it was Jane's turn to sound doubtful. "Are we sure about that?"

"I mean..." Dustin trailed off, like he'd never really given it that much thought before. It made sense; Scott Keegan was a hardworking crowd-pleaser but there was nothing saving him from getting cut from the payroll when the new mayor and his dad didn't golf

together. Or fish. Or whatever it was the well-off did in Hawkins—besides, obviously, move out of Hawkins.

Jane shook her head, surer by the second. "Scott would've been a pawn, just like me, then a loose end that needed tying up in case he wised up after they won."

"Okay, so you and he had..." Steve stared pointedly at the floor as he forced himself through the rest of his question, "*relations*...so that you could convince him to do something for you...*for* Ford...that they needed to cover up by firing him after he'd served his purpose?"

"Except—and all respect for your form there, Janie," Dustin interrupted, "but sex is just sex at the end of the day—you weren't gonna sex him into doing anything he really didn't want to do. And it's not like you were underage or anything and Scott wasn't running for office, so a scandal wouldn't have been at the forefront of his concerns if this was a simple case of blackmail. So, what did the sex achieve?"

It was amazing, how he made Jane's cheating incident sound so casual. She knew it wasn't because he didn't care about Mike's feelings or the fact that this was technically some highly fucked up form of sex without consent—without even sound mind. It was just cold, hard fact: it happened. And now, the fact that it happened served a purpose; it was another avenue for answers.

"I guess we better ask him that," Jane answered.

"So, is that..." Steve glanced in the direction of the bathroom, clearing his throat. "I mean, will that be before or after we go rip into Mike...or do I have time for a shower?"

"Rip into *Mike*?" Straight to his feet, Dustin whirled on Jane. "What *happened* last night?!"

Jane felt her throat close up. She glanced at Steve. He glanced back, resigned.

"You go shower," she told him quietly. "I'll talk to Dusty."

"I don't understand."

Dustin was crying. Jane was crying, too. And Steve had spent so long in the bathroom that she was convinced he just didn't want to come out now in a towel to all the crying. Then he'd be the half-naked asshole sitting there either crying or just looking like a half-naked asshole.

She had her arm wrapped around Dustin and they were curled up on the couch.

"I think they're using subliminal messaging or something," she murmured gently, like there was a gentle way of doing this. She'd been up most of the night—it would've been pathetic if she hadn't thought of *something*. "Audio-visual cues to provoke specific mental responses. If her unconscious cognition was particularly susceptible to the cues, it could have presented as addiction-like symptoms." Jane chewed her lip for a second. "On steroids."

She didn't know. She was no expert. And still, she hated to remind herself, had very little confirmation of any of these swirling theories to go on. But they all fed into each other. They all, in some crazy, messed up way, made sense under the parameters of her reality. And until she was proven wrong, she'd kind of put all her eggs in one basket now, as it were.

"But *why* would my mom be playing a computer game?" he demanded. "She barely knows how to turn one on and off!"

"It was a focus group, Dusty." Jane pulled him closer as fresh tears ran in rivulets down his face. "The game is still as yet unreleased. Maybe they advertised it as a special offer—partake and we give you a free or discounted copy when it comes out? I don't know. Maybe she was bored; maybe she just wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Maybe she wanted to buy it for you."

His face screwed up and he started sobbing again, so Jane squeezed him harder.

The bathroom door creaked open and Steve poked his head out. Over Dustin's shoulder, he threw Jane a pointed look.

She sighed. "Dusty, you said other people moved away. Can you name them? There was a slew of patient files labelled 'candidate' in the safe. We need to figure out what connects them all."

Dustin wiped his blotchy face and sucked in a long, unsteady breath. "I don't know... There was old man Davies. And... Carly McCoy."

"Both candidates," Steve confirmed, coming forward in his towel. "And Peter Hendrickson and Sally Albright."

"Yeah, I know Sally," Dustin said. "Used to be a clerk at RadioShack right after she was widowed." The wistful look in his eyes dimmed. "I knew Sally."

"So, she moved away, too?" Jane clarified.

"Yeah. Yeah..." Dustin stared far away. "Chicago." He blinked. "Or, that's what I heard."

Suddenly, his eyes were ablaze, urgent, and Jane remembered how she'd been feeling all last night.

"We have to know where they're putting the bodies!" he insisted. "I need to find my mom!"

"We will, Dusty." Jane threaded her fingers through his and squeezed. "That's why we need to find Mike. He needs to tell us why his name's on that file."

"He better have a fucking good reason or be the idiot who knows nothing," he seethed.

"May I remind everyone of the fact that there is a police officer standing in this room?" Steve tried to sound authoritative, hands on his hips.

Jane and Dustin scanned him from the towel up and let it do the talking for them.

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'll go and get changed, *then* I'll say that again."

There was a knock at the front door. Steve turned. Jane leaned around his cotton-covered posterior to see.

Another knock.

Steve freaked out. "Oh, fuck! Janie, hide! No one can know you're here!"

"I'm not hiding!" she argued in a hiss. "We don't even know who it is yet! If it's someone bad, I'm pretty sure you'll want me nearby—"

"This is non-negotiable!" he whisper-shouted.

"Janie, he's right." Dustin was on his feet and the boys advanced down the hallway together toward the entryway.

Jane rushed to the bookcase just behind them, pressing herself against the wall.

"Okay." Dustin picked something up.

Jane couldn't believe it.

Steve's bat.

Although he had been reaching for the doorknob, Steve pulled back, scowling. "What are you doing with that? Give me that!" He swapped positions with Dustin so he could wield it with both hands, muttering, "You could poke someone's eye out with—"

The knock came again.

Dustin nodded, mentally preparing himself, reaching for the knob.

Jane flattened herself out of view, holding her breath. She heard the door creak open and then nothing.

For a full ten seconds, absolutely nothing. She didn't think she'd ever experienced a longer ten seconds in her life. And then she heard his voice.

"Is she here?" There was a short, scared pause. Jane didn't know if it

was scared because he wanted the answer to be yes or because he wanted it to be no, but then he asked again, "Is she really here?"

Unconsciously, like she really was at the mercy of someone else's control, she stepped out of hiding, turning toward the door.

She met his eyes and his mouth opened like he couldn't believe it—like he needed to say something but couldn't find the words.

So she spoke first for him.

"Will." She was breathless; her eyes were tearing up. She couldn't stop herself from smiling.

Will stared past the boys in the entryway as if he'd completely forgotten them. He didn't move. Jane supposed it was one thing to hear something and another thing to see it.

Her breath hitched and from all the way outside the door, it seemed to break him from his daze.

His porcelain face cracked into a massive grin and he ran at her, covering the distance between them in six easy strides and swinging her up into his arms. His embrace almost crushed her as he squeezed her against him. Jane thought she heard a rib crack, but she couldn't stop beaming and burying her face in his neck.

"I had to see for myself," he said into her hair. "I couldn't believe it."

When he eventually set her back on her feet, he pinched her arms, almost able to encircle them with his hands. "You're so skinny!"

"I was on a cleanse," she murmured, and he snorted and hugged her again.

It was through an unbelievably concentrated haze of relief that Jane heard Steve say, "Oh, hey man."

Still encircled by her brother's arm, she turned them both around, and felt her eyes go wide.

Mike stood in the doorway, glancing between her and Will, then

Steve and Dustin... And briefly back at Steve again.

Seeming to get the idea, Steve hitched his towel higher around his hips and put his bat down. "Right, pants. I'll be back, then." And he passed Jane and Will and disappeared into his room.

Jane felt Will's grip on her shoulder tighten in reassurance as she watched Mike nervously, her line of sight unbroken even when Steve nudged past her to get down the hallway.

Mike met her eyes for a moment, his revealing nothing. Then he focused on Dustin.

Dustin cleared his throat, still holding the door open. "So, Mike. Turns out we have a lot to talk about."

A very reasonable tone for someone who had just received the confirmed loss of his mother—even more reasonable when one considered that Mike was certainly in a position where a lot of that talking required a lot of explaining on his part.

But Dustin didn't get very much further. Mike was frowning—mistakenly, Jane thought maybe that was just his new thinking face with a sprinkling of sullen considering her presence in the room—but the frown became a scowl as Dustin started to invite him into their home and—

Mike punched him in the face.

Jane and Will both jolted in surprise as Dustin went reeling—it had come out of nowhere.

Scowl still distinctly present, Mike stepped over the threshold and unbuttoned his blazer. He'd clearly missed the memo that work attire wasn't required on a Sunday.

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin straightened up, palm to his jaw. "Seriously?"

"You deserved it," Mike muttered, his scowl fading to cold dispassion.

Dustin scowled. "Fine! Then can I take a swing at you for your evil corporation killing off my mom?"

After a half-second of vacancy, the cold dispassion contorted into utter confusion.

Jane flinched hard, hand darting to cover her ear when both Mike and Will demanded in unison, "What?!"

"You think the game I'm working on is killing people?" Mike summed up, staring at all of them like they'd absolutely lost their minds.

"We think the game you're working on is running people into dehydration and starvation by overriding their basic survival instincts—ultimately causing death," Dustin clarified, and Steve jumped in after him.

"It sounds crazy, we know. But the paperwork in Ford's floor safe—"

"You were breaking into a doctor's office and *I'm* the criminal here?"

They were all squeezed around the coffee table, documents strewn across the flat.

Mike nodded, clearly not at all convinced. "Okay. Where is this report, then? Show me."

"We couldn't risk making a copy," Jane said. "Ford's copier is ancient and every time you switch it on, it lights up and screams bloody murder—"

Speaking over her like she wasn't there, Mike followed his initial question up with an automatic defence. "*War Engines* isn't even a finalised product yet. It's still undergoing alpha testing. The idea that it could be ready for even a preliminary beta test—"

"Well, it's out there, Mike," Dustin snapped. "And it killed my mom and a shitload of other people, so rather than playing Denial Guy, could you stop being such a know-nothing jackass and find out who at the company is running the focus groups?"

Mike turned to him with a scowl. "Okay, *what* is your problem? I'm sorry that I'm trying to be the voice of reason here but what you're proposing is crazy!"

"What's my problem?" Dustin nearly yelled at him. "Were you not listening? My mom is dead!"

"Yesterday you thought your mom was in Florida!" Mike fired back.

Dustin looked like he might actually punch him back. "Yesterday, Janie and Steve hadn't found the smoking gun in a floor safe!"

"It's hardly a smoking gun," Mike dismissed. "And do you seriously expect me to believe that the project—*that I run*—is actually a front for some kind of brainwashing technology? Do you?"

"God, you've become such an asshole," Dustin snapped.

Will piped up. "I work at the company. Maybe I could dig around for some answers—"

"And end up in a body bag?" Dustin shook his head. "You work in Level Design, Will. You spent last month drawing them a radioactive ogre. No. We don't want you getting hurt."

"But it's fine to throw me under the bus!" Mike bit out.

Dustin sighed, trying to control his anger. He failed. "*You're* in a prime position! You have literally two people above you in the chain of command! Ask around. Somebody, somewhere would surely be able to tell you something!"

"Unless he's the fall guy," Steve reasoned suddenly. "He's young, he's inexperienced." He shrugged. "Why not put his signature on everything and let him take the fall if the shit hits the fan?"

"Okay, I read everything I sign," Mike dismissed, his tone intimating that he was done being ridiculous about this.

Glancing between them all, Jane sighed. "Guys, could you give me and Mike a minute?"

Four pairs of sceptical eyes focused on her.

"Really?" Steve asked nervously.

"Yeah, really?" Dustin echoed.

She shot them both a glare. "Why don't you show Will the balcony?"

Dustin sounded doubtful. "Okay, but it's really gonna have to be a minute. Daytime or not, it's bloody cold out there."

"This won't take long."

Both she and Mike sat facing each other in tense silence as the others filed out. She was waiting for the last foot to hit tile and for the door to snap closed but Mike was apparently a little less concerned about the matter of privacy.

"I don't know what you think you're going to say to convince me but —"

"I'm going to see Scott Keegan in a minute," she interrupted him, and he fell silent like she'd just told him he had six weeks to live. Ignoring this—and the briefest flash of residual anguish that crossed his face undisguised—she continued, "I need to know what I asked him for on the night of the rally, because the more I remember and the more I figure out, the more convinced I am that the drugs Ford gave me were for a specific purpose that went beyond teeing me up as a good candidate for this stupid game. I think the candidacy just depends on whether you're mentally fragile and whether you'd have someone raising red flags if you just up and moved to Florida." She glanced through the glass door at Dustin. "I think Claudia was a lonely woman with a distant husband and her reason for living had lived apart from her for four years. On top of that, since Dustin got a job immediately upon graduation, he wasn't technically a dependent anymore."

"What does this have to do with my game?" Mike hissed, like if he raised his voice any louder he might completely lose it and bellow at her.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "But I would bet my life that it's all connected, Mike. And it all starts with figuring out if Arthur Culkin's heart attack was actually a heart attack."

"What else could it have been?" Mike demanded, and Jane realised he was really going to force her to say it.

"I need to know Ford didn't ask me to kill him," she said shortly.

When he just looked at her, betraying nothing, she admitted, "There's a lot I don't remember. I'm probably going to be joining the dots for a long time, but I know enough to know I fucked Scott Keegan for a reason, and it wasn't my reason because for all the reasons in the world, I would never have even been tempted by any guy who wasn't you."

When he still said nothing, she set her jaw. "But just because it wasn't my reason doesn't mean I don't have a right to know, whether it relates to this or not. And I get the feeling you want answers, too, since you didn't have to show up here today after you told Will. And you can keep up being an asshole to the real friends you do have who don't deserve it, or..." She stood up. "You can pull your head out of your ass and help me figure out what the fuck is going on."

She raised her eyebrows expectantly, extending her hand. It wasn't a peace offering, but it was a promise—a promise that she'd have his back all the way to the bottom of this.

She wanted him to say yes. She wanted to prove enough of her theories to him that he stopped thinking of her as a she-devil. But she'd given him an ultimatum, and she couldn't wait around all day. Either he was coming or he wasn't. No amount of waiting was going to change that.

"Well?" she demanded. "Asshole or with me?"

AN:

A lot of thoughts, theories and emotions kind of flying around in this chapter. Sorry if it seems messy, guys, but I feel like it really would, being in the characters' situation. So much new evidence keeps coming up and they have no idea what to make of it—I feel like it's kind of going to keep being messy until it's not, you know? Hopefully it doesn't make it less readable.

I'm sorry it's a slightly shorter chapter and that I cut a few chunks out of it. Honestly, I just don't want to keep saying the same thing over and over in every chapter, so when it's time for characters to explain new information they've gathered to other characters, I might skip over the actual relaying from time to time. You guys already know what they found in the safe, after all!

Also, shout out to John Horvath - there is an Operation Paperclip connection. Good eye! No more clues, though, as to the extent or significance of that connection. You're all just going to have to read on! And AliKattt - Yep, I'm Australian, love! And none of the stereotypes are true! Well, maybe a couple of them. :P

Anyway, thanks so much for reading, guys, and please tell me what you think. I love hearing back from all of you.

Until Chapter 8, then. :) -Inara x

8. In the Cold Light, I Live

AN:

Okay, guys, this is a freaking long chapter, so I don't want to keep you, but I have a few words of warning first:

The M rating starts here and now. There are going to be some trigger words that I'm sure a lot of you won't like and adult themes that aren't going to be classed as 'healthy.' That's the thing I wanted to portray, though—that oftentimes, being in love doesn't make your actions honourable or less subject to judgment or ridicule. Love is painful and it's crazy and people in love often treat each other in completely reprehensible ways. If anything, I've found that love, for all its virtues, makes everything seem murky and the confusion from that just breeds hostility and resentment at times. So be warned. I want to hear your thoughts, but if your thoughts are that you don't think Mike and El would treat each other this way, just remember: no relationship is perfect, and without proper communication, there is almost certainly going to be a tremendous amount of pain and unpredictability.

And on that cheerful note, happy reading. :D

-Inara x

Eight In the Cold Light, I Live

The Keegan house was a French style stone mansion set back from the suburban street like the family was afraid of getting the stench of 'poor' stuck in their clothes. Jane had always found it ridiculous that money created such barriers. There was something so fearful about the layout of the house; solid like a fortress, sheltered in the shadow of a towering brick wall. What a defence. What a thin veil for the fear within, superficial as it was.

The Keegan boys' lives had been permeated by fear. Scott, the collegiate older brother who relied on his friends in high places and his father's pocketbook to get him through law school. He was the

heir to the Keegan fortune—God forbid he didn't transcend the meagre standards set by the Hawkins upper crust. Not when his father had made his mark in London, New York, Boston. And Isaac. Jane had been in school with Isaac. Like his brother before him, he'd been the star quarterback of Hawkins High School and all-around town charmer. He said what he needed to say, when he needed to say it—to staff and parents, to girls, to his posse of moronic dying-to-bes who just weren't quite 'star material' themselves... They both spent so much energy chasing after perfect, Jane almost felt sorry for them. Almost.

She'd only been to their house once before—for the Homecoming afterparty in senior year. Jane was so glad being here didn't stir up more hazy memories. A part of her had been dreading a sudden flashback to more uncharted moments lived, and the idea that she could have been here with Scott sometime after the rally had held her close to vomiting the whole drive over.

Mike hadn't spoken a word to her since they'd left Steve and Dustin's. Back in the apartment, he'd taken her hand—with pointed reluctance—and risen to his feet.

"Even if it's all true," he said impassively, looming over her.

It was the second time they'd stood close enough for Jane to feel the pull of him—the magnetism that reduced her to a tenuous statuette of metallic slivers in heart, mind, and cunt—and all she wanted was the summons to damn caution and let instinct overwhelm her.

She felt entirely bare, pinned like a butterfly under the intensity of his dark eyes, but it wasn't passion that fuelled him. At least, not passion of the same kind.

"Even if Ford is a sick son of a bitch and you're just as much a victim in this as Claudia," he tendered. "I still owe you nothing. You understand? Those two people we used to be—they're never coming back."

She understood. Her body certainly didn't as it unreservedly yearned for him to be closer—so close that they couldn't even be considered separate—but her rational mind understood.

Four years didn't just disappear.

But even after she nodded—even when they were both standing there, just breathing and staring, prisoners to each other's gazes as the moments stretched and faded—he was still holding her hand.

He'd noticed eventually, ripping his hand out of hers and severing the tie. Jane had found it difficult to recover quickly and she wondered if, like his had always been without mystery to her, he could read her feelings right off her face.

She hadn't felt that sense of wanting in so long. Emotionally, yes, but physically, her desire had been as barren as a creek bed in a drought. It was like they fabled of the Romans salting the ground of Carthage out of spite: so nothing could grow ever again.

Maybe it was the effect of the drugs fading, but all Jane had had to withstand up until this point were the emotional feelings of loss and wanting that hung heavy in the space between them. Now, the tension was thicker. What had before been the empty space where all the things she should have said—all the things still waiting to be said—should have been, was now surging and bristling, like electricity in the air before a storm, with all the things she should have *done*. It didn't feel empty anymore. It felt dangerous.

She wondered if it was similar for him. Obviously, they came to the board from opposite sides. He was the noble white knight who had shed blood in defence of a truth he believed in—one he had never questioned was worth believing in. Not until she'd advanced to the fore; the black queen, swathed in deceit, who had slaughtered him in pursuit of a greater target. To Ford, he had been the first of many obstacles—a minor annoyance—and he'd been swatted like a fly as such. No fanfare or glory; just death.

Jane wondered if, beneath his severity and attempted detachment, Mike was afraid of that quiet death occurring twice. There was nothing noble or honourable about being left to bleed out and rot, alone in the cold. She'd cut him away like a gangrenous limb. It was incredible how something that had always been attached to you—a part of you—could be so foreign and strange and grossly repugnant in an instant.

But he had to know—Jane was sure, he *had* to know—that he was no gangrenous limb and she was no butcher. The infection that had spread through her from the stump and into her heart—her very being—was Ford; it was Ford and Welling and everyone who had ever puppeted her perception or considered her an experiment. Mike was the angel who watched over her from beyond; he was the antibiotics injected right into the vein. Just the thought of him sometimes—like on those lonely nights at Central State when Jane lost herself thinking about how long a life sentence really was—was enough to keep her heart beating. Whether he realised it or not, he was always the one who saved her.

That's why this change in the air was dangerous. They weren't teenagers anymore but Jane knew it wasn't a matter of hormones that made her clear-headed self unable to distinguish between sex and love with him. It sounded utterly Shakespearean, but she didn't know if she had the strength to be near him and not be his to temper. Even prior to chemical intervention, she'd always suffered the ailment of a wildly turbulent disposition. But it was especially gruelling, feeling so much, so quickly again, after years of conditioning herself and being conditioned to lethargy. Mike had always been her eye of the storm. It wasn't a matter of being regulated or controlled by him, but more one of channelling his calm. Unshakeable, steady Mike. He was her great and only love for more than one reason.

Or he had been. Once.

For her, he always would be but he was right—those two kids had loved and lost. It was just a dream, the idea that they could be like them again now.

But it was her dream.

Mike pressed the gate intercom and told the housekeeper his name and that he was here to see Scott. She didn't sound too bothered, like she was eager to stay out of Scott's way. All that security and no human defence. Scott had to be one hell of a prince to garner that kind of loyalty.

They drove right up to the main house and, still smeared in makeup, Jane didn't seem to raise any eyebrows as the older woman ushered

them up the staircase inside the foyer, telling them they'd find Scott on the second level in the billiards room. Social as Scott had always been, it was probably nothing outside the usual for the woman to receive young visitors on his behalf and direct them on.

As they passed several open doors leading to leisure rooms of varied description, it became clear that no one else was home. Mid-Sunday morning, Mr and Mrs Keegan were probably in town having brunch with the rest of their mannerly entourage. Isaac was probably off training or extricating himself from a woman's bed, if he at all resembled his high school self anymore.

Jane found it vaguely disturbing, how the rich tended to remain in the family fold long after the appropriate time passed to leave the nest. Isaac was only twenty-two, but Scott had been in Steve's graduating year. Only a few years shy of thirty was, for most people, too old to still have one's wings tucked close to the body. Then again, the mansion, much like the Keegan name itself, was a part of their brand—it was, after all, the image that they were selling. Besides the obvious question of why one would leave a place that catered to one's every whim and desire, there was the additional quandary: if not this, what would the home that epitomised one's future look like?

Mike was first through the door to the billiards room. From behind his back, Jane could hear the soft click of balls and a slight rustle as one of them found the pocket nearest them. Mike stopped moving when the other man registered him, and the long silence indicated to Jane that maybe Scott didn't even remember him.

Not, it would seem, the case. Quite the opposite.

"Wheeler?"

The sound of his voice stirred the queasiest feeling in Jane's stomach. It reminded her of all the days she'd spent sick with hunger at Central State, before her body had grown used to the neglect.

"You're the last guy I'd ever expect to see here."

"It's not a social call, believe me." Mike's voice was even. Worryingly even.

"What is it, then?" More clicking, and Scott sounded marginally sardonic. "Finally here to teach me a lesson for sticking it to your girlfriend back in eighty-nine? Come on, man, it only took you four years."

"I know how long it's been," Mike bit out.

Scott exhaled slowly and the clicking ceased. "Okay, for real, man, is that why you've come into my house—you wanna get even? Take a swing at me, I won't stop you. But I'm not the bad guy here. That girl was toxic. She didn't need to climb me like a tree for you to be better off without her."

Mike, who'd been rigid throughout this whole exchange, broke his robotic stance at that and went to step toward Scott. Jane didn't know what he was planning to do or if he was even thinking at all, but as hard-line as Mike could be, he had never been a fighter. Four years didn't suddenly change that.

She caught him by the back of his blazer and pulled him back beside her, pressing one hand firmly against his chest to restrain him.

She turned her focus on her previous mistake.

"Oh, Scott." He'd said toxic—she'd give him toxic. "Now you've gone and hurt my feelings."

Scott's eyes went wide and he clamped both hands down on his pool cue, as if wielding it as self-protection.

"Who the hell let you into my house?" he blurted.

Releasing Mike, Jane stepped in his direction, raising an eyebrow. "Do you really think that's your primary concern in this second?"

For every step she took toward him, Scott took a step back.

"You're supposed to be locked up!" he insisted. "You're crazy!"

"Am I?" Jane looked disappointed. "See, that's the thing that always got me about the battle between the sexes. When there's something

wrong with a guy, it's a black mark against his name for about two seconds. Like you, for example." She gestured to Scott, who she was shepherding into a corner. "You were a dumbass *and* a fully-fledged adult who fucked a high school girl, but both of those flaws were quickly forgotten when they struck 'crazy' against my name. You don't even need a murder to lock that reputation down—a girl is almost always screwed as soon as she's labelled 'crazy.' It's like nothing out of her mouth makes sense anymore. Does that seem fair to you?"

She had Scott up against a wall and it was almost funny that he genuinely seemed afraid of her right now. Unfortunately, that humour stemmed from the fact that the last time she'd seen him he'd been ramming her hips into the counter-top and grunting "Oh, fuck yeah, baby!" So, despite the dichotomy between then and now, it was anything but funny.

"The thing is, Scott," she said as she pressed her palm flat against his chest and steered him around so the backs of his thighs were pressed against the edge of the billiards table. "There are a couple of tiny details they missed out at my trial—details that could allow my late father to finally rest in peace." She leaned in closer to him and lowered her voice. "See, I'm not really crazy, Scott, but I promise I can make an exception if you don't tell me what I want to know."

"What can I tell you?" Scott looked around wildly, his gaze falling on Mike. "Bro, cage your bitch, all right? I don't know what she's talking about!"

Ignoring the name-calling, Jane grabbed him by the jaw and turned his face back to hers. "What did I ask you for, Scott, the night of the rally?"

His eyes stretched wide. "What, are you kidding me? A ride to heaven, sweetheart. Apparently your boy here wasn't doing the job well enough."

Jane threw up her free hand as Mike's face contorted in fury and he braced himself to take a run at Scott again.

"Mike," Jane cautioned steadily, not releasing Scott's gaze. "We came

here for a reason, remember?"

In her peripheral vision, she saw Mike standing very still, still poised to attack, fists clenched.

"Mike," she repeated, voice soothing.

Reluctantly, he relaxed, and she lowered her defensive hand.

"You're really not very smart, are you, Scott? You want his help, but you piss him off. You don't want me to hurt you, but you call me a crazy bitch and then talk to Mike like I'm not even here. You're really taking 'playing the field' to a whole new level, and I really don't mean that as a compliment."

Despite her tiny stature, she used the talents she did have to push him back onto the green felt a little further, and he threw his hands back to stop himself from falling.

"Whoa, what are you trying to do to me—mount me again while Wheeler watches?"

She rolled her eyes. "Honey, you weren't even what I wanted the first time around."

"How about the second?" he muttered. "You seemed to enjoy yourself fine when you came back gagging for me in the mayor's office."

Like electricity in the air again, Jane felt Mike's reaction like it had been shocked right into her veins. His sudden intake of breath, the clench of his fists, his inability to constrain the utter betrayal that broke out across his face, too sudden and consuming to keep it hidden inside. Jane couldn't meet his eyes. She could only imagine how much this news hurt him, after everything. The thing was, though, it was news to her, too.

Her flat palm became a fist in Scott's shirt and she yanked him forward, bringing them eye to eye.

"What did you say?" she demanded, eyes gleaming with the promise to flay him if he lied to her.

"The mayor's office," he answered tensely. "After the game. You came in for round two and left me naked in the copy room, no pants on hand." His face twisted, revisiting the memory. "*Why* would you take my pants?"

"So you couldn't follow me," Jane realised aloud, glancing over at Mike.

He glanced back and then away, understanding the gravity of this new insight but still unable to speak—still unable to even properly look at her.

Heart squeezing, she turned back to Scott. "So that first night, I didn't say anything else?"

"We didn't exactly spend much time talking." He nodded warily in Mike's direction. "Once Wheeler here stormed off, you said 'see ya 'round' and left. I thought that was the end of it until you showed up in Culkin's office."

"But we did it in the copy room?" Jane questioned, like she couldn't believe anything he said until she had the details for everything.

He nodded. "Yeah, but only because Culkin came back. We practically had to commando crawl out of there when he came through the door."

"Hence the copy room," Jane said. "But did I seem at all inquisitive—in the office, I mean?"

"I don't know why you're asking me. You were there too." When she just glared him down, he held up his hands. "I don't know, you fiddled around with his desk drawers a bit, I think. Said something about the keys to the kingdom. You were joking, though, right? I mean, this is Hawkins. What's the point of all-access in Hawkins?"

"What's the point, indeed," Jane muttered. Releasing him suddenly, she turned to Mike. "If Culkin was still there when I left Scott in the copy room, anything could've happened to him."

Mike was frowning, looking reluctant to even address him, but finally he asked Scott, "Hey, Keegan—about how long were you hiding

amongst the printers?"

Scott shrugged unhelpfully. "I don't know. Would've been a while."

"Did El have anything on her—a bag or something?" Mike followed up.

Scott's face screwed up in confusion. "El?"

"Jane."

"Oh. Uh..." Bless him, he really did look like he was trying to remember. "Nothing, I don't think. Just a short little skirt and a pair of boots. That's all I remember, anyway."

"Of course, it is," Mike spat, but Jane's thoughts were elsewhere.

"Boots?" Jane echoed. "What kind of boots?"

Scott looked like he really didn't understand why that mattered. "Uh... Black? To the knee? Why does that matter?"

Jane felt her heart sink. "Oh, it matters. It matters a whole lot."

Knee-high boots. Plenty of space to conceal a syringe or pills in boots like that. Even if it hadn't gone that far, a bug or listening device of some description. But Ford had demonstrated thus far that he hadn't limited his use of her to just surveillance. If he'd made her an assassin's guide once, what would have stopped him from just making her an assassin straight-up? Maybe he knew she couldn't kill Hopper herself, even drugged out of her mind. But a near-stranger? Jane didn't have the same faith that she would have had the presence of mind to spare a near-stranger.

For any normal person, it would have been a leap. For Jane, on the other hand, it was starting to feel like things like this were nothing more than a small shuffle.

"Scott, was Culkin still there?" Her voice was suddenly urgent. "Was he still in his office when you left that night?"

"How should I know?" he responded. "I made a break for my car, first

chance I got. I figured it'd be easier to suffer the rap for letting myself off early than explain to my boss why I wasn't wearing pants." Seeing her dissatisfied expression, he offered, "But it wouldn't have mattered anyway. He died on the footpath."

"He died *that* night? You're absolutely sure?" Jane clarified. "Scott, didn't you think that was a little weird?"

He shrugged. "Guy was old. He ate sausages from Maggie's Café every day. Heart attack wasn't exactly off the cards."

Jane rubbed her temples. "Okay, so, what time would that have been?"

Scott groaned impatiently, like she really needed to learn which questions he'd be able to answer. "Late? Does it matter? Why do you care so much what happened that night anyway? You got what you came for."

"Did I?"

God, he really was an idiot. Jane felt Mike tug on her sleeve and she let him pull her aside.

His voice was deathly low as he said, "If you went to all that trouble of getting inside, why would Culkin have died after finishing up? What'd you do, create the perfect excuse to wait around inside the building, then jump him on his way to his car? It doesn't make sense, El."

Jane chewed her lip. "I mean, it could've been a delayed reaction? Poison or something? I don't know—maybe it really was a coincidence and I was just using Scott to wait until everyone was gone to lift something from Culkin's office? If he was still there, I couldn't have done that."

"Unlikely, since the goal was to take the office for Jack Hopper." Mike frowned and amended, "Or, the probable goal. What would Ford have needed so badly he couldn't wait for his buddy to take office? The emergency election was the fastest one I've ever heard of—if they were after the 'keys to the kingdom', they only had to wait a couple

of weeks, tops." He sighed. "El, you know I think all of this is crazy, but I also think that if you were there that night and you weren't just there for"—he winced—"Keegan, then the mayor was your most likely target."

A thought occurred to Jane. "What if it wasn't just a delayed reaction? What if the reason he died on the kerb was because I didn't finish the job inside?"

"Why wouldn't you have finished the job inside?" Mike asked.

"Maybe I got spooked when I heard Scott leaving?" she proposed. "Maybe somebody else was there. I don't know. All I know is, if I was sent there to do a job, I wouldn't have left until it was done."

"Hence waiting around outside, if you thought inside was compromised." Mike nodded, as if—under the crazy circumstances they found themselves in—this scenario was sound thus far. "It would've been really late by then. Plus, the game had everyone over on the other side of town. No one would've been around to see anything—at least if you were quick. But why would it have taken so long inside? I mean, it looked like a heart attack and we know drugs are Ford's strong suit..." He looked doubtful now. "I mean, think about it: how long does it take to jab a needle? And on top of that, I know he was old, but I seriously doubt Culkin would've quietly let you approach him again if you already attacked him once."

"Maybe he didn't know it was me the first time?" Jane offered lamely. "Maybe I took him by surprise or covered his eyes or something?"

Mike still didn't look convinced. "El, whether he knew it was you or not, he still would've been skittish. And again, the needle. You'd think Ford would've made it so the job would be quick."

"What if there were two needles?" she thought aloud. "Two compounds designed to react with each other rather than one designed to react with receptors in the body?"

"You really are a junkie," he muttered, and she shot him a stern look. He eased up. "Okay, two needles—working theory. Is there any way to prove that? We can't exactly just walk up to Mr Clarke and ask him

what two compounds they could have been."

"We don't need to." Jane sized up the pros and cons of a different plan she was working up in her head. She grimaced at all the ways it could go wrong. Unfortunately, this one involved bringing in another person, too. "I know someone else who could help us out: Beatriz, the clerk at Mary Sue's. She's a pharmacy dropout."

Mike gaped at her doubtfully. "Are you kidding me?"

"What?" She rocked back on her heels, feeling the absence of his vote of confidence like a slap to the face. "She could help us."

"She's a dropout!" he hissed. "You just said it! And besides that, even if she could help us, why would she? El, you're an escaped mental patient who also happens to be a murderer!"

"I'm *not* a murderer!" she snapped, then remembered this whole exchange with Scott. "Well, not of my own volition anyway. And besides, I was in Mary Sue's the other day. Bee knows me. If this all goes to shit and she finds out who I am, she's far more likely to snitch if she doesn't know the full story."

"And, what?" Mike was making it very clear he thought this was her stupidest idea to date. "You're going to tell her, are you?"

She set her jaw. "I thought I might."

He rolled his eyes, groaning. "You are *so infuriating!*"

"Well, if you put that up against bloodthirsty and insane, it doesn't really rate too highly on the list, does it?" she retorted.

"Fine!" He sucked in a much-needed calming breath. "We'll go talk to this Beatriz, then we *stop* bringing in new people. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Jane turned back to Scott, who'd just been sitting on the edge of the pool table in a daze for the last couple of minutes. She kind of felt sorry for the guy; four years since the town freak stole his pants and was put away for murder and now she turns up at his door and threatens him? A bit surreal.

Unfortunately for him, he was about to be threatened just a little bit more.

"Scott." Her tone was harsh and domineering. "If you tell anybody I'm here in Hawkins or that you saw me with Mike, I'm going to come back here, tie each other your limbs to a corner of this table, and carve my full name into your vital organs. Do you understand?"

He flinched. "I thought the whole point of this was that you weren't crazy?"

"I'm not," she replied. "But the police are rotten from the top down and I'm only going to prove that if you stay out of my way. For old time's sake, don't add your name to my list. You got it?"

His shoulders slumped slightly. "Got it."

"You better have." Jane locked eyes with Mike and jerked her head toward the door. "Let's go."

They were crossing the foyer when Scott called down to her over the balustrade, "Hey, wait!"

She looked up.

He looked torn, like he didn't know whether to trust her and furthermore, whether he was okay with taking the chance. Seemed to be a common problem going around lately.

When he eventually found his words, they were about the last ones Jane had expected to hear.

"Culkin was a grumpy old bastard, but he was a decent guy, you know?" Scott hesitated. "He was patient with me."

Jane felt her expression soften a fraction. She was in no way about to befriend the guy, but she couldn't exactly hate him. Besides having a gross fetish for the complimentary and just-old-enough, he wasn't an authentic dickhead. He just tried really, really hard.

She replied up to him, "I'm going to figure it out, Scott. I promise. I'm going to figure it all out."

"You do that," he said. "Now we've both got promises to keep. Don't make me regret this, okay?"

Jane shook her head. "I'm not in the habit of breaking promises."

And glancing at Mike, whom she realised had been watching her but looked away as soon as she met his eyes, she shed the mansion's sturdy walls and tipped her face up toward the sun. The light was weak and not quite warm, but it was real. No more fluorescent lights, no more basements. No more cages. Whatever happened down this road, she couldn't forget that she was really alive again now. She wouldn't stop digging; she'd ruin Ford and Welling and burn Fause to the ground if she had to. But she had to do it with her eyes truly open now. She had to appreciate that all this pain and all this duplicity and falseness and outright corruption and criminality was only coming to the surface now because she was here, awake and breathing. Finally. She had to remember.

She owed it to the others who were not.

Like the drive over, the drive back was quiet, just the rumble of the car for background noise.

Only once did Mike speak to her, and apparently it only took the once for him to learn his lesson.

"You've been here two days," he said, like he was marvelling at the outlandishness of something.

When he didn't follow up that thought with anything else, she prompted, "And?"

"And you've already met a girl *in a lingerie store!*" he criticised, staring at the road. "I mean, *seriously*, where are your priorities?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I left Central State with the gown on my back and the one pair of giant one-size-fits-all-or-thereabouts unisex underpants, Mike. Forgive me if I needed to stockpile a few things."

It was a really, *really* bad time for a joke—especially a really un-

funny joke—but there was something about the horribly unpleasant, awkward tension inside the car that made making things even more awkward impossible for Jane to resist.

"Besides."

Mike side-glanced at her suspiciously because he recognised that tone.

She sighed dramatically. "A girl's not really free until she's dressed downstairs to party, wouldn't you agree?"

He didn't respond and he most certainly didn't smile. His fingers just tightened on the steering wheel and they drove the rest of the way back to the main shopping district in silence.

Before Dustin's grand jailbreak, Jane hadn't really had access to mirrors since being moved to Central State—she certainly hadn't seen herself in any photographs. She'd wondered for a while what a convicted Jane Hopper looked like, then she'd realised it was probably best not to have confirmation of what she feared: a gaunt little skeleton, hair and eyes and skin dull from a lack of Vitamin D and non-recycled air and an over-abundance of drugs ingested. She hadn't wanted to be vain about it, coming home to Hawkins, but on Friday night, after the boys had gone to sleep, she must have spent hours staring at herself in the mirror after brushing her teeth.

So, that's it, she remembered thinking. That's me now.

She'd thought about it again, in those first moments in the Fause building when Mike had stared at her like he had no idea who or what he was looking at.

A brief flash of that skeletal, shadowy face in the bathroom mirror and she was unable to suppress the thought: *That is how he's seeing me.*

She'd really avoided looking since. She figured that with enough time, enough sunlight, enough calories... She could be a stranger to herself again, only this time it would be worth the wait.

It was only as they drove into the central business district and pulled up opposite Mary Sue's that Jane realised even that was a pipe dream. How stupid of her to think she could be here—really be here—and not have her past follow her.

The posters were everywhere, the same awful photo of her pale, thin face stretched taut around sunken, vacant eyes plastered to every wall and tree within sight. Her patient's record photo—in which, incidentally, she really did look like a psycho.

Jane's eyelids slipped closed as she tried to block it out.

Now it wasn't just her friends or Mike; now it was her whole world. *Everyone* knew the face she was trying to hide, even from herself—her *real* face. The one that didn't feel like a mask when she *did* brave herself in the mirror and admitted silently that it was still there and that she could slather it in makeup to her heart's desire but until all of this was over, it would still be there, unchanging.

Being a fugitive really was a lot like being a ghost.

Jane was here, but she wasn't. She wasn't *allowed* to be. Alone here in the car with Mike, this was one of those times she felt most strongly that people didn't even *want* her to be.

But *she* wanted to be. She wanted to be seen. She wanted them to see her.

Just not like this.

"Looks like word finally got around you were missing," Mike said tensely, his eyes carving out the street for possible surveyors.

Jane worried her lip. "I could always go in alone? You could get as far away from here as possible? You guys know everything now. If I get caught, you can figure this out without me. You can finish this—"

"Don't be stupid—we're not finishing this without you!" Mike spat. "You think we got you back for two days so you could play the sacrificial lamb *again*? What a fucking stupid thing to say."

Mildly surprised at the exact wording of the ardent dismissal, and

even more confused by the plausible sentiment behind it, Jane sunk down a bit in her seat. She was tiny enough at the moment to be mistaken for a child at a glance, if her height were obscured. It was difficult though—as narrow as she was from every possible angle, her frame was still steadfastly long-legged and reedy, and Mike's car was practically a matchbox. Knobbly knees or not, they were still jammed against the dash.

She huffed and sat back up. "Plan B?"

Mike opened his mouth to respond when a cop car turned down the street behind them, the deputy riding shotgun on his radio.

Mike panicked and grasped Jane's head. She barely had a moment to register the cops themselves before he was yanking her down into his lap.

Pain spiked in the back of her neck at being forced into such an awkward contortion and Jane grabbed his thigh in protest, her fingers digging in hard.

He jerked, glancing down. "Would you stop that? It fucking hurts and they're gonna think I'm hiding something!"

Despite her strain, Jane couldn't withhold how asinine he sounded. "Mike, we're sitting here in broad daylight and my head's in your lap—I think they're going to be more concerned with what you're *not* hiding."

"Don't be gross," he muttered.

She shot him a look out of the corner of her eye. "I'm not. I seem to recall many an adolescent evening spent in this exact position. It wasn't 'gross' for you back then." She angled her face toward the door compartment. "Although I can't say the same for me. Have you cleaned this car *at all* in the last four years?"

"Are you really trying to have this conversation with me now?" he hissed, trying to keep his lips as still as possible.

"About cleaning?" she murmured dumbly.

He glared down at her.

She sighed. "I'm not trying anything. I just don't think you need to be acting like the idea of you and me repulses you like a viral wart infection."

"You are a viral wart infection!" he cried out at her, briefly forgetting to keep his voice down. "You leak pus and disaster everywhere! You practically spew it!"

Really not enjoying his adoption of her simile for his successive—and rudely excessive—metaphor, Jane braced her neck and rotated her head to glower at him. "I never asked Dustin to come and get me!"

"But that's what you do, El—you get inside people and you make sure they can never let you go. You make them waste their own lives so they can focus on you!"

"I didn't *make* Dustin do anything!" she argued back. "Or is this not really about Dustin? Is this about you?"

Mike shook his head stubbornly, shifting in his seat and knocking her in the face. He didn't apologise.

"I told you already, I owe you nothing. We're just chasing down a lead and getting back to the party."

"I'm not saying you owe me anything, Mike!" Trying to find a comfortable position, Jane crossed her arms on top of his leg and rested her chin on them. She sighed. "I just... I lost you too, you know? I know, it was my fault, but that didn't mean it didn't kill me inside! You're acting like I wanted this—like I *wanted* to hurt you—and I'm just here trying to find a moment in time when none of this had happened yet and we were happy! Is it really so bad to remember? Do you really resent me *that much* that all those years we were together are just...what? Locked away in a box in your mind forever now?"

He nodded along with her words as she said them, but not in a way that indicated he was agreeing with her.

His voice was toxic as he responded slowly, eyes blazing black as he

stared out the windshield in front of him, "Noise, El. Right now, you're just noise."

Jane's eyes went misty as he threw her own words back at her. Even though she'd replayed the memory over and over again in her mind since then, she'd never truly felt them until now. The shoe was on the other foot now, and imagination was nothing against the real thing.

Feeling forlorn and deflated, she relaxed her chin through her twiggy arms into his thigh unthinkingly and he jerked suddenly, his hand lurching up to grab the overhead safety handle as he cried out, "Fuck, El!"

It was amazing how much the surface circumstances of this experience held parallels to much more favourable times.

Jane eased an inch off his lap and tried to distract herself with the matter at hand—a fairly important matter, if her pathetic sodding heart could so recall.

"Is the squad car gone?"

Mike sounded less annoyed when he answered her, like he was too relieved to be properly pissed at the moment. "Yeah, they just pulled back onto the high street."

Jane sat up. "So, Plan B? Or are we going to hide out amongst the braziers?"

He shook his head, shifting into reverse.

"You can't stay in town," he answered. "Not if you care about Steve and Dustin, at least."

Ignoring that jab, Jane fixed him with an inflexible stare. "Mike, I'm not hiding in your mom's basement again."

"Like I'd take you there," he scoffed. "No. This place is outside the city blocks. Not out of town exactly, but far enough that you won't have too many neighbours."

"None except the serial killers and ejected drunks."

She grimaced at the idea of the kind of folk who lived out where town met farm. She knew the vague area Mike was taking her—it was basically a roadside motel for people who weren't actually just passing through, unless it was for a quick hustle with a working girl or rent boy. It was the reject house.

Even more unfortunate was the fact that the guy who had built it and whose family still held the deed today had named it after himself, Edgar Scarvy. Jane couldn't remember when the vandalism on the front sign had started—probably as far back as when Steve was still in school—but it had reached a point where they stopped bothering to clean the paint off. So, it had become 'Scurvy House,' and remained so to this day.

Mike pulled up in the parking lot and Jane stared up at the peeling dark green balcony railings and the gaping pale yellow monstrosity behind.

It was still only mid-afternoon, but the building was facing away from the sun, with very few windows to let the light in. The idea of hiding out alone here honestly sounded less appealing than taking her chances with the police in town.

Jane swallowed. "Maybe I could just camp in the woods? Or the junkyard? The bus has a decent amount of floorspace—"

Mike got out of the car and slammed his door.

Jane heard him rifling around in the trunk for something and, upon finding it, he slammed it closed as an indication that it was high time she get off her ass. She sighed and complied.

Reception was a hole in the wall beside the south stair, and Jane started toward it before Mike caught her wrist and pulled her along in the opposite direction.

"You already have a room?" she demanded, jogging every few steps to keep up with his long strides. "How does that work? You like the fixtures, do you? Or maybe the neighbourhood has good schools?"

"Would you *please* shut up for five seconds?" he implored, finding his

key to the door as they climbed the north stair and muttering over his shoulder, "It was Bauman's. Remember, the private eye conspiracy theorist Nancy and Jonathan told us about? He took out a lease on this place as a cheap safe house the last time he turned up convinced someone was trying to silence him again. Now that he's back in Sesser, Nancy sends him rent checks so she can sublet on the down-low."

"Nancy lives *here*?!" Jane practically hurt herself trying to picture it. She couldn't—it was just too ludicrous. "God, *why*? This place is a dump!"

The key was clearly catching in the lock and she watched Mike jiggle it furiously for a few more seconds before she pushed him out of the way and let her focus home in on the lock, half-blocking Mike out as he responded, "She doesn't *live* here—she lives in Indianapolis with Jonathan. She uses this as storage space mostly since she knows Mom will go through everything she leaves at home, but she and Jonathan used to stay here whenever they wanted to get away. I guess they still do, whenever they come back here to visit. It's handy because her name isn't connected to it, so no one will find you here." He shrugged. "It's cheaper than a storage locker."

The lock groaned and clicked over, the key ejecting itself into Jane's waiting hand. She opened the door. "Yet equally hazardous to human dwelling."

Mike rolled his eyes and pushed past her, pointing out rooms in a rapid-fire tour. "Bedroom, bathroom, kitchenette. If you need towels, they're in shelves behind the shower curtain and there should be cereal in the kitchen cupboard."

Jane realised he intended to leave her alone. She'd expected it eventually, later in the evening, but not right this minute. "Wait, you're going?"

His expression made it seem like that had to have been obvious. "If I don't touch base on a Sunday, my family's going to know something's up."

"Well, why didn't you just take me to *your* place?" Jane asked,

instantly ashamed of how much the question sounded like a whine.

He shook his head. "In town. Besides, I have roommates." At her dejected expression, he conceded reluctantly, "I'll come back tonight to check on you. I'll pick up some clothes and stuff from Dustin's on my way back so you're not just festering here in all..." He gestured to today's—and, incidentally, yesterday's—outfit. "That."

God, Jane really needed to get on top of her hygiene routine if that was the best the boy who'd loved her for years could do.

She followed him to the door and he turned on the welcome—actually, the 'Not Welcome'—mat.

"Don't let anyone in or go outside," he ordered seriously. "Don't talk to anyone or try to call anyone or... Just, none of it—don't do any of it. Just wait for me."

Jane did wait. She waited and waited and waited, and then she waited some more. She showered and found an old dress she couldn't remember Nancy ever wearing. It was a Spanish style; black with vibrant floral embroidery and a sweeping skirt with a slit high up the thigh where the fabric crossed over itself. Nancy had always been very slight—much slighter than Jane in her healthy form—but with the way she was now, the ruched cap sleeves fell off-the-shoulder and Jane's protruding clavicle was the true star of the ensemble. She tried pulling her hair forward over both shoulders, but short of knotting it into a beard under her chin, she was going to need a jacket to cover up the bony reminders of that nightmarish place.

Alas, there were no jackets about, but she found a thick crocheted throw, and pulled it around her shoulders as the hours dragged by and the damp cold set in for the evening.

The yellow lights overhead the walkway outside blinked on as it grew dark, their glow filtering in through the tiny crack in the drawn curtains beside the door—the only window in the whole apartment. Jane watched the shaft of light glint off the god-awful peachy tiles that made up the entryway. The rest of the apartment was carpet—ugly, ultra-thin 'you could cut yourself on it' navy carpet—but oh, no,

not the entryway. Wouldn't want to cover up those terracotta-adjacent tiles—now *they* were a drawing point.

Jane was practically falling asleep when she could no longer convince herself that the eyesore was even the tiniest bit important. She really shouldn't have been resisting it; she'd been eating well for the first time in years over the last couple of days, but the same couldn't be said of her sleeping habits. It was just too hard—aside from the fear of more forgotten memories with her conscious defences down, she also suffered from knowing that somebody could be plotting, someone could be starving, someone could be *dying*, while she fell asleep.

Logically, she knew she would be of no help to anyone without sleep.

But then, there was also Mike. He'd said he'd come back. She wanted to wait.

So, she waited. And waited.

And finally there was a knock at the door.

Jane leapt from the couch and practically flung herself at the peephole, checking to make sure it was him.

He raised an eyebrow back at the peephole, and she swung the door open.

He took a half-step through, so he was still standing half in the cold, and appraised her outfit.

She pulled the throw tighter around herself subconsciously. "You're back."

"I told you I'd come back," he murmured, but he didn't sound angry anymore. More...impassive again. Even more so, unreadable. He held up brown grocery bags in one hand and Dustin's laundry bag in the other. "I come bearing gifts."

"Just so long as you come," she replied without thinking.

The unreadableness made it impossible to gauge his acceptance of

that, and he looked at her for a second—*really* looked at her—and a tiny crease appeared between his eyebrows as he seemed to debate responding or not.

He chose not, clearing his throat and telling her, "Dustin says he's put a couple more things in here to keep you occupied. Case files, weekend crossword—you get the idea. He and Steve are going to visit tomorrow night if they finish early enough. Otherwise, Tuesday."

He handed her the laundry bag and Jane's eyes followed his hands as he gestured with the remaining shopping bags. "Dry storage; fridge. It's only basic. You've only got enough for a couple of simple meals in there but the pasta should fill you up well enough until the rest of us can think up a more permanent plan. There shouldn't be an issue—there's just pasta, milk, potatoes and carrot, some greens, a couple apples..."

Jane was nodding along so automatically that she didn't actually notice exactly when he stopped speaking. When it finally registered in her mind—so random and inexplicable, just cutting off mid-list—she forgot the grocery bags and looked up into his face.

He had stopped, mid-list. Mid-everything, apparently, because now he was just studying her. His eyes ghosted over her lips, her neck, her exposed shoulders, and the upside-down triangle of soft skin running down between her breasts—only exposed by her lack of curves to hold the buttoned fabric together.

His mouth twitched, almost imperceptibly, and he returned his focus to her eyes. His were black as ink, and the depth of the unknown in them scared her.

He took another half-step inside, this time directly toward her. Jane flinched back, matching his advance with her own retreat.

Why was she suddenly so nervous? This was *Mike*. Her Mike.

But also, not her Mike.

This was the Mike who'd spent all day ignoring her, snapping at her—the Mike who had a right to be resentful and hurt, but not

inscrutable like this. She'd spent too much of her life unaware of people's intentions.

What did he want?

Jane could deal with anything, so long as she knew what he might want.

He took another step, but this time when Jane lifted her foot to step away again, she set it back in its place.

He was standing over her, so close she could feel him without actually needing to touch. He was so warm... He was so warm, she shivered.

His eyes sharpened, detecting the goosebumps running down her arms, the hardening of her nipples in the thin dress, and the tiny hitch in her breath as she failed to breathe normally.

For a moment, they just stood there, almost against each other, and, out of nervous habit, Jane licked her lips. As subtle as it was, the movement drew him, and he watched her lower lip graze slowly between her teeth, now slightly glossy with saliva. His eyes darkened, his jaw working. His striking cheekbones seemed to strain against his pale skin as his cheeks bowed inward as his own lips parted. He lifted his gaze back to her eyes.

Jane's heart beat once, twice, three times, the tension in the entryway so thick that she could almost hear it.

She could certainly feel it; it was pressing down on her like the weight of a thousand almosts, what ifs and maybes.

And then his body slammed into her, his fingers knotting immediately in the roots of her hair. His mouth caught hers, and Jane could feel teeth, but it was what she realised she wanted. So long without him, even longer without *all* of him, and she didn't care what hurt; she didn't care if he ate her alive at this point—she just wanted to feel him.

He threw the door closed and sunk back against it, hands dragging down her back and yanking one of her thighs up around him. The slit

of her dress fell open to the stitching and he fisted it up higher as his hands found her ass.

One of his legs was between hers and he jolted her hips forward. She gasped at the sudden friction as cunt met thigh.

He growled into her mouth at the noise and ripped her first layer from her shoulders, throwing it down and kicking it away as he pushed her by the waist down onto the floor.

Jane yelped as her exposed ass and thighs hit tiles—there may have been a dress in the bottom of Nancy's closet, but Jane hadn't been about to root around in boxes for the possibility of her ex-boyfriend's sister's spare underwear—and she tried to wriggle backward so at least half of her was on carpet. But she only got her shoulders over the entryway lip when Mike came down on top of her, forcing her legs open at the knees and dragging her back against him.

Jane held his eyes as she heard the jingle of his belt and he unzipped his trousers, and she clung to his hips as she felt him rub himself along her slit. He hissed at the sensation, his body covering hers completely as he sunk down on one elbow. His eyes flashed with dark satisfaction at the picture of her lying there beneath him, curled around him like it was her natural place, waiting and trembling.

She knew she wasn't ready—physically, she wasn't ready. He had to remember that these things took time. But that didn't stop him, and she didn't try to.

She jerked up against him as he pushed inside her, her teeth grazing his throat. It didn't really matter that it was slow—in a way, it made it worse. She bit her lip closed and let out a strangled whimper into his ear, her fingers digging into his skin as he buried himself all the way inside.

Her back arched back against the floor, and she felt his stomach drag against hers as he stroked slowly, in and out.

She felt lips against her neck, warmth and wetness along her jaw. It burned cool like mint as his breath washed over it.

His speed picked up, and Jane realised quickly that he wasn't planning to last.

One hand gripped her hip to bruise, holding her steady as he thrust faster and faster—it was her anchor as she jerked back and forth across the smooth tiles, locking her in place as he pounded hard enough that Jane wondered if this sudden onslaught was intended to punish.

He seemed to answer that for her as her ripped one of her sleeves down and bit the suddenly exposed flesh, quickly running his tongue over the mark and then sucking her nipple into his mouth.

Jane's head fell back against the carpet, her lips parting as she moaned in sudden bliss. Her face screwed up and she moaned again as he laboured over the delicate bud, always so responsive to his mouth. His teeth grazed over it and up again, and he nipped the skin along her collarbone, making his mark there, too.

Jane tried rolling her hips to match his rhythm and slid her fingers into his hair, but a sudden ferocity flared in his eyes and he smacked her arms down above her head. He kissed her viciously, and Jane could feel the anger barely contained inside him as he made her submit—made her submit to his cock, teeth, and tongue. He thrust deeper, more deliberately, as he slowed his kisses, and Jane realised he wanted her to recognise it for what it was: the crest of a wave, before it broke.

Jane stared up at him as he pulled away from her, holding her eyes as his hands returned to the almost non-existent swell of her ass and he suddenly knelt up, hoisting her over his thighs so he could pull her right up to the hilt; make her feel the full shape of him again, the size... All of him. Everything. She let her eyes close and her head loll back as she tried to focus on their breathing; his was quiet and interwoven with uninhibited, almost animal groans, while hers was breathy and broke into increasingly loud whimpers as he drove himself harder inside her.

"Look at me," he panted, his voice quiet but no less commanding. "El, look at me!" he repeated, the order becoming a growl.

But she couldn't obey. His cock drowned everything else out. All she could hear was the damp slapping of skin against skin and all she could feel was his hips ramming against the backs of her thighs as he drove into her, again and again. The tendons at the apex of her thighs felt as if they were tearing as his forearms stretched her out, wider and wider, and she knew that in this moment, he could see *everything*.

She'd never realised until she'd had sex that there was naked and there was *naked*.

She felt high at the thought of it; inflamed. How long it had been since she'd wanted to just be *fucked* into primal, sweaty oblivion—because with Mike it could be that *and* the unerring promise that it was for life.

She was whimpering steadily now, eyes squeezing shut and her mouth falling open as she held her breath for moments at a time and gasped and whined his name.

"Mike! *Fuck*, Mike! Mike!"

She reached up, clamping a hand down over his, which held her so far up her thigh that her fingers fluttered against her aching entrance and his hard shaft as he rode out his demons into her now hot, wet cunt.

At her touch, his rhythm faltered, his movements becoming less controlled and Jane could tell he was getting close.

But he kept claiming her—claiming her and claiming her like he was trying to fuck back all he'd lost.

Maybe he wasn't the only one to know the feel of her anymore—but he didn't realise how he'd always be the one and only in other ways. He was the *only* one to watch her bounce uncontrollably on top of him while crying out his name; he was the only one who'd seen her face flush pink and sweat stick her hair to the back of her neck and her forehead as he made her gasp and scream and clutch at whatever part of him she could reach as he brought her to ecstasy with just his fingers and his lips and tongue. He was the only one who knew her body like a finely-tuned instrument, the only one who knew where to

touch and how to touch her—how to play her to sweet release. Even if this wasn't about that tonight—even if it wasn't about reciprocity or love—it was about reclaiming at least a part of her that had been *his*. And it was there in his eyes when Jane finally opened hers. About love or not, his were finally unguarded, and he was angry and he was in pain.

His cock had its root in his soul, after all.

Her fingers tightened around his and he was panting, staring straight into her as his hair fell into his face from exertion, bouncing off his forehead in damp, thick spikes.

Jane felt like her whole body was on fire under his gaze. She couldn't form a coherent thought besides just wanting him to keep going—right up until the end—whether she felt raw already or not. Her muscles clamped down around him and he grunted like he might lose it.

"Do it," she whispered.

God, she wanted him to—his face was a whole other world of perfect when he let go. Forever guarded, cautious Mike, even before she'd hurt him—he'd never wanted to seem too vulnerable to look after her. But when she made him come apart inside her, she could see into his deepest corners like his entire soul opened up. And she loved everything she saw.

"Do it," she repeated, gasping, glancing down between them to where they were joined, smacking into each other like waves against a reef. "I want you—I want you to. Mike..." She was coming apart in her own way. Not orgasming—not tonight—but she felt as if a few more thrusts and she'd unravel like a heart made of string. She bit her lip and tears pricked her eyes. "Mike, I'm looking. Mike, I see you."

His expression clouded right as he started to shudder and lose all control, jerking deep inside of her and crushing her ass up against his pelvis as a feral noise ripped from his throat.

He leaned over her, bearing down on her, his eyes scrunching closed and he exploded inside of her, the last few smacks he rained down

feeling less like waves crashing and more like a building roaring down over her.

He collapsed his full weight on her, his warm breath making her hair shiver against the side of her face as he caught his breath in her ear. His fingers traced up the side of her stomach, over her ribs and the peak of her breast, along her collarbone... They came to rest around her throat.

For another minute, they seemed suspended in time, just lying there in a sweaty, half-naked heap, his thumb stroking down the line of her carotid.

Jane licked her lips and turned her face a fraction, wanting to see him. But it was a mistake.

The moment they locked eyes, hers still half-lidded with lust, what they'd just done seemed to dawn on him.

A glint of panic and the window in his eyes closed up, and suddenly he was pulling himself out of her unceremoniously and pushing himself to his feet as Jane wilted from the loss of him. He jerked his trousers up and buckled his belt, dragging his fingers through his hair to smooth out what had fallen out of place.

And then he was gone, the door slamming. He didn't even look at her.

Jane lay there in complete shock.

She knew she should get up. She should have been picking up her scattered groceries or showering again or *something*. But she couldn't move.

She just lay there; chest still heaving, skirt still pushed up around her waist, front buttons ripped open. Her nipple still stung from when he'd bitten her.

Her legs sagged open, exposing her aching centre to the cool night air. She had forgotten to ask him about the heating dial.

She really hadn't been ready for him. She knew she was going to hurt

tomorrow. God, she already hurt right now. But she didn't care.

As much as she had tried not to dwell on it, she'd been sick to her stomach for the past four years that Mike wasn't the last person she'd slept with.

Now, she could feel his seed leaking out of her and she realised how irresponsible they had been—she wasn't on any sort of birth control—but it had all happened so fast... She doubted either of them had thought about it.

It had just been so sudden.

Why, Mike? she wanted to ask. *Why here, why now? Do you even know?*

Eventually she crawled onto her knees and covered herself, not that there were any witnesses in the cramped space.

Hot water blasted down her back in the shower, and she let the spray take over her senses, submerging her head completely.

She could still feel him; moving, thrusting, biting—his tongue laving over her skin and sweeping her mouth as his hands crushed her legs and hips around his throbbing cock.

It hadn't been the right time; it had been too early and he was still too angry, too bitter. So she sat there in the tub under the boiling spray, wondering until her fingers and toes were pruned and her back was raw; *what were you thinking, Mike? What turned groceries to fucking? What made you want me like this?*

Was it even me you wanted?

9. White Nights

AN:

Guys! How the hell are you? I'm sorry for my disappearing act—had some personal issues to deal with recently. But I'm back and I promise I'll never do that again! So excited to gain some momentum with this story again—especially after last chapter's ending. Honestly, every review and PM I receive, I treasure, but I was really nervous about THAT scene and you all just made me feel so much better. It was what it needed to be, you know?

Evie, dearest, you've been so supportive and patient these last few weeks. Even so far away, you're a wonderful friend and I'm so lucky to have you. x

I'm lucky to have all of you! I hope this chapter doesn't disappoint.

-Inara x

Nine White Nights

"Do you feel lonely, Jane?"

Swirling white. Shrieking wind. Moaning house. It sounded like she felt, overwhelmed with loss.

"Tell me what you see."

A dark room. Her father, framed in silver. Dust.

So much dust.

The door, creaking open.

Mike.

"Eleven."

Dust. Breathing it in, choking on it.

Mike's eyes, his blank face.

"Where are you?"

Grey eyes.

"You don't want to disappoint me, Jane. Do you?"

Ford's hand on her thigh.

"Whatever it takes, Jane. Whatever it takes."

Mike's eyes. Blank eyes.

Mike's eyes on her lips.

Mike holding a gun.

Grey eyes.

"Good girl."

Needles. Two needles in her hands.

Cold. Cold grass, cold air, cold skin.

Sweaty palms.

Pumping heart.

"Oh, fuck yeah, baby!" Scott Keegan's hands on her.

"Good girl."

Mike's eyes.

Swirling white.

White into grey.

Grey dust. All grey.

Mike's eyes.

Mike inside her. Mike devouring her. Mike everywhere.

"El, look at me."

Ford's hand on her thigh.

Mike holding a gun.

"It's the gun."

Hopper.

"It's the gun."

Hopper in surrender.

Mike pulling the trigger.

"Goodbye, Jim Hopper."

Bang.

Jane bolted upright in bed, heart racing. Her ears were ringing; ringing with gunfire. She could still feel his blood on her hands, on her knees and shins as she clambered over to him on that creaky wooden floor. They'd made her wear that blood for far too long in the holding cell. Looking at it had made her sick but it was all she could focus on for hours. Then later, when they'd deigned to let her scrub it off, she'd taken skin with it.

Now, her hands were so tightly fisted in Nancy's robin's egg sheets that her knuckles had turned a deathly white in contrast. Not that she had much colour to begin with—four years spent underground with only a Vitamin D deficiency as company could make the fairest of anyone.

She felt nauseated. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck from her hairline and she could feel the heat coming off her chest in waves. Her eyes were sore and bleary. Her throat was beyond raw, like she'd gone days without water. Was she getting sick? Was that what this was? Maybe her immune system was struggling to accommodate all the sudden changes in her routine and

environment?

Stop it, she told herself. You're just tired.

Resting her face in her hands, she jolted again when another bang reverberated through the wall behind.

Then another, and another.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Jane grumbled.

What perfect timing. Of course—*of course*—the shot that had woken her—that earth-shattering sound that still, to this day, remained her greatest trauma—had, *unbelievably*, coincided perfectly with someone well on her way to suffering le petit mort next door.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Cry. Cry. Cry.

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

Jane grimaced at the free show and dragged herself out of bed.

She was hungry but she felt too sick to eat.

Rifling through the cupboard, her eyes caught on an untouched bottle of bourbon on the top shelf.

The irony of it was spectacular: this place was stuffed to its ceiling with a functional couple's memorabilia and of course Jane was able to pinpoint the only vice she hadn't yet tried to quell the pandemonium bringing down her skull.

She could have laughed at herself for how quickly she made the decision in her mind.

Laughed. Yelled. She was living alone in Scurvy House; she was about thirty pounds underweight due to a four-year stint in a mental asylum; she was wanted for the murder of her father and probably guilty of the murder of the late mayor; the love of her life had just pulled the ol' screw, nut and bolt; and, to top it all off, her two

doctors had been using her mind as a playground for just shy of a decade. Her life was a complete joke. What did a few drinks alone in a shitty motel room matter?

So stupid.

So stupid.

She already knew the answer to that, but she needed to quiet the circus.

Jane had never much liked bourbon. She'd never much liked drinking at all, really. With her childhood, she never liked being far out of her own mind.

God, again, the irony.

She climbed back into bed, curling up around the bottle with her back against the wall. It kept shuddering.

It was disappointing, really—this woman had no creative range at all. It wasn't like dirty talk had to flow like classic literature or anything, but constant repetition of the same basic phrases exposed a distinct lack of inspiration. Jane couldn't be sure that she was faking the majority of her pleasure, but she had her suspicions.

At a reasonable hour, at least, she had no issue with a degree of vocalisation during sex—indeed, often the occasion called for it—but the endless stream of keens and moans and crying out for the Lord and saviour was a bit much. Throw one 'master' in there and it could easily pass for poor quality—highly unrealistic—pornography. Candidly, it sounded much like a fifteen-year-old boy's idea of what sex might be like.

Alas, the actress showed no indication of a quick finish.

"Oh, God!"

"Oh, *God!*" Jane parroted, thumping her fist back against the wall and gulping down more bourbon. It tasted foul.

The couple didn't stutter.

"Fuck, baby!" the woman cried. "Oh, baby, yes! Fuck me!"

Jane rolled her eyes, taking another swig from the bottle.

More variations of the same.

"Baby, fuck! Make me come! Make me!"

Jane banged on the wall again. "For the love of God, make her!"

She heard a muffled male grumble that sounded vaguely like, "Who the—? Fuck off!"

But he had his lady friend on her way, and, with a few more porno-bunny squeals of delight, finally peace descended.

Jane kept drinking.

Pretty soon, she wouldn't have noticed if there was an orgy going on in her room and the building was on fire.

She realised her own hypocrisy here. Really, she did. Not five hours ago had she been splayed out underneath Mike practically right up against the communal walkway, but that was different. First off, they hadn't made *nearly* that much noise. Secondly, for all it was lacking, it had been the first real open and honest exchange she and Mike had had since she'd come back.

It was almost funny, to think that had only been Friday. She'd literally been back in Hawkins for a weekend.

A weekend.

Maybe Mike was right—maybe her speciality was destroying her friends' lives.

You get inside people, he'd said.

"But you got inside me," she murmured against the lip of her bottle, then tipped it up, swallowing again.

One weekend and already four years felt like nothing. In all that

time, she hadn't even caught a glimpse of him—let alone spoken to him—and she'd just submitted to him completely like it was the most natural thing to do, like there was nothing about each other that they needed to re-learn or, hell, learn from scratch first. Four years and she'd already cried over him against the side of the bathtub. Four years and she already ached to feel him again, despite the fresh bruises and persisting discomfort.

Four years was a long time.

Just apparently not long enough.

Jane set the bourbon down on the bedside table and scrubbed a hand through her hair, staring at it. She'd definitely had enough—already a third of the bottle—but it called to her, promising that just a little more would make it all better.

Just a little more.

Jane rolled her eyes and reached for it again, already feeling disappointed in herself.

Did she have an addictive personality? Or was she just circumstantially weak, desperate to find some temporary relief from the harsh reality that Jane Hopper was a lie?

She'd tried so hard over the years to avoid thinking it. By blood or not, she was Jim Hopper's daughter. She was nobody's property and she belonged with her family and friends, free and in Hawkins. But that all felt like the lies she'd always told herself now. Even the man who had helped her believe them had been manipulating her, saying whatever he needed to in order to keep her calm and make her trust in his good intentions.

The truth was plainer now: she would always be Eleven. A zero and two ones. Not a real person.

Real people didn't have to live like this. Once they crossed over—became monsters—they belonged in prison, or deserved to be dead.

Is that what she deserved? Was this?

Did she deserve to be poked and prodded for her entire life? Did she deserve to be locked out of sight and dehumanised and used?

Had she really been so stupid in the last forty-eight hours as to start believing that a couple of discrepancies in a well-respected doctor's notes were the key to her absolution? Ford was one of the Bad Men she'd always feared—there was no way around that now—but that was for what he'd done to people like Mrs Henderson.

But Eleven?

Maybe she should have started drinking a long time ago.

Making up for lost time, she lifted the bottle to her lips once again. Her mind ran wild, remembering every drink she'd ever witnessed: Dustin, Lucas, Mike and even sometimes Will at parties; Mrs Wheeler's nightly chardonnays; Jonathan when Nancy left; Steve when Carly left; Hop when he thought he'd failed his second daughter.

Everyone drank to their own extremes at some point. Granted, it was for varying time periods and some found a functionality in it that others couldn't. Steve had been particularly bad. He'd never been so hurt. He picked himself up eventually, but in those early days it just seemed to be what was done in Hawkins: when you wanted to forget your pain, you drank. It was so much easier to forget.

Jane set the bourbon back on the bedside table and lay down, throwing the pillows off the bed and spreading out her arms and legs like she was making a snow angel.

She hadn't assumed this position in years. She could almost feel the lap of salty water against the sides of her face and the weight of Nancy's pink dress over her as wetness spread through it.

Why recreate a nightmare? she asked herself.

Why do anything at this point?

Next door, softs thuds alerted her to an encore.

Hell, no. Jane bristled. Not if they wanted to make it through the

night.

She reached up, smacking the wall again.

"For fuck's sake!" she shouted over her head. "Either pay up or shut up! I'm sure you'll still get your money's worth!"

So rude. When had she become so rude? Granted, what was going on next door was definitely not without monetary exchange—it was either that or an actual porno film set—but since when had she become so abrupt and offensive and...*tactless*?

When no further noise came, she realised it was probably way back when she'd politely—but no less wrongly—copped four years of incarceration.

She reached out for the room's light switch with her mind, and, next second, she was immersed in blackness. Reaching further, she found a boombox in the room beneath her and turned its volume up to full blast. She heard shouts of confusion and objection erupt building-wide, but she tuned them out, focusing only on the static noise. It would stop soon enough. She didn't need long.

It was almost like feeling nothing again—*being* nothing.

Drifting.

Staring into the abyss.

She was weary, her limbs heavy. Even her eyelids resisted lifting.

She was laid out on some kind of medical diagnostic workstation—like a dental chair, except instead of a spit sink beside her and an operatory light above, it was all just screens and dials.

Something else was off.

Heavy as they were, she could still feel additional weight on her wrists and ankles. Knees, too. Neck. Freezing metal against her bare skin.

The whole room felt like an icebox. It was more than air-conditioning; her

breath was a ghostly phantasm swirling above her in the stark space. The air felt so unforgiving in this place—like the lasting chill imparted by a dissatisfied drill sergeant... Or a disappointed, unloving father.

Jane was too drowsy to panic. She was too drowsy to feel much at all right now—even being confused seemed like an incalculable amount of effort—so she just lay there listening.

"Her responsiveness is beyond anything we could have hoped for."

It was a man who was speaking. No one she recognised.

"Speed of response increases with every trial, as does sensitivity to cues. In the last series, we found that even in increasing distracting stimuli interference, she still obeys all subconscious directives."

He and to whomever he was speaking were standing somewhere behind her, undoubtedly viewing all the same screens she was. There wasn't much else in the room.

So much white.

Jane felt a twinge in her side. Careful not to move her head at all to betray her consciousness, she peered down the length of her body. Her hospital gown was cut down her side, a large slit allowing points of entry for what looked like giant, curving claws—metal, of course—all resting against her skin in a neat line, just shy of puncturing the surface. Directly beneath them and protruding from the same contraption, were long, translucent tubes. These, indeed, had broken skin. It looked as though they had been carefully—surgically—inserted between each of Jane's ribs. She had no way of telling how deeply exactly, but she could feel her drowsiness beginning to ebb as she encountered true reason to panic.

The tubes were attached to a tank of clear liquid. With nothing coming out of her through them—not even the slightest bloody tinge—it could only mean one thing: something else was going in.

Unaware of his patient's sudden objections to his administered treatment, the man continued, "I know I had my doubts, but Ford was right; by stripping the rational blockers, the whole process just becomes a simple matter of stimulus-driven attentional orienting—leading, not controlling.

And with that reduced role, any remaining suspicions she might harbour are effectively rendered unfounded by her own mind. In a conscious state, she internalises everything—it becomes her mind's most natural inclination." He sounded unabashedly impressed with himself. "It's quite remarkable."

A second voice responded, this one female. It was equally unfamiliar to Jane, yet somehow even less appealing—like cold fish.

"Don't sound too pleased with yourself, Howard. The subliminal design is, I grant you, an achievement, but you've produced these results in an entirely controlled environment. What is the value of my investment when you still have no idea how to isolate the trigger? You promised me Ford would be extraneous by month's end, and, thus far, all you've managed to do is reiterate how critical he continues to be to her psychological conditioning." She sighed loudly. "Do you know how a dog revolts when it doesn't trust its master? It bites."

Jane heard footsteps approaching—heeled footsteps—and immediately closed her eyes, striving to appear serene.

She heard the woman's voice directly over her.

"I don't care what you have to do, Howard."

Jane resisted flinching as she felt fingers grasp either side of her mouth, pushing her lips out of shape.

"I want my attack dog in one week. If you're not up to the task, I will find someone who is."

"Very good, ma'am," the man named Howard uttered, sounding nervous but no less determined. "I won't rest until it's done, if it proves necessary."

"Perhaps you won't, Howard, but she must," the woman said. "You have barely three hours until sunrise. Make sure she's back to daddy dearest by then."

Jane remained very still, listening to one pair of footsteps recede. She could feel the man still above her, watching the woman leave, and she knew she'd be damned if she gave herself away now.

She couldn't see herself to be sure, but she could feel what she guessed to be electrodes adhered to her face and just below her ears, and a full cap gelled to the rest of her head.

Claws, tubes, and electrodes. What in the actual fuck were they trying to achieve here?

They had to be sick themselves, right? All this couldn't possibly just be in the name of pure science. Papa had been abusive, for sure, but he'd never cut into her like this. He'd wanted her obedience—he'd bullied her and manipulated her for it. He'd made her believe that in some twisted way, he'd loved her. He'd made her love him. Love him, fear him—Jane couldn't be sure it hadn't been the strangest, most damaging blend of both.

It was awful, but there was some sense to it. Papa had been working for the government—for their country. Who was this man working for? What was his end goal?

Suddenly, Jane felt breath on her face and a hand on her thinly-covered stomach.

"She's gone now." His mouth was very close to her face. "No point pretending with me." He gave her a shake. "May as well open your eyes. Won't make a difference, in the end."

Reluctantly, Jane did, watching him straighten up.

"Why won't it?" she asked guardedly.

The man shrugged. He was a little past middle-aged, but not nearly as old as Ford. He did, however, lack that empathetic effect to his features that his superior, Jane now realised, merely wore as a mask.

"Does it ever?"

Jane frowned, feeling colder than she had before, and this time it had nothing to do with the arctic temperature of the room.

"Have I been here before?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

The man couldn't have projected less sympathy if he'd tried. "Sweetheart, we've had this exact conversation before."

Jane swallowed, trying to appear undaunted. This was difficult, considering her current position.

"So, what now?" she demanded. "What happens at sunrise?"

The man moved around her to the workstation and began fiddling with dials. "Oh, you know, the usual: you wake up in the middle of nowhere, you go home and pop more pills."

Jane watched him closely as horror dawned. The sleepwalking.

She hadn't spent her nights these last few months wandering around aimlessly in the clutches of REM sleep. But of course she hadn't—with all his noise traps, Hopper had made it practically impossible for her to stumble out of her room without waking him. Whatever state of consciousness she'd been in, her awareness and coordination certainly hadn't been impaired.

"And until sunrise?" she asked nervously.

The man chuckled. "A far better question." He pointed to the screen directly in front of her—the largest by far. "Watch the presentation. Follow the prompts."

Not wanting to obey any command he gave her but really having nowhere else to look, Jane focused on the screen.

What came up confused her.

She didn't know exactly what she'd been expecting when he'd said 'presentation', but it certainly wasn't what looked like a highly pixelated cartoon.

She'd seen Mike play a game that looked much like this before—some fantasy quest computer game. She'd bought it for him, actually—she couldn't remember for which birthday. He'd played it like a zombie with no other vocation in life until he finished the campaign.

But now the picture sharpened. It was difficult to explain—Jane didn't know quite how to put what she was seeing into words. It was so clear but somehow also distorted. It was like looking at layers and layers of video footage playing directly on top of each other.

Insects feeding. A slaughterhouse floor. Argon lights.

"Why am I looking at—ung!" She cut herself off, choking on sudden agony as her entire body convulsed and seized up.

Jane realised it wasn't just the pain—she was really choking.

She couldn't form words.

She couldn't breathe.

It was like her respiratory system was entirely paralysed. Her mouth was open, but she couldn't draw in any air.

The pain itself was like needles—needles everywhere; thousands at once. Millions, maybe. She couldn't make any sense of temperature—was it hold or cold? Scalding or freezing?

It didn't matter.

It was unbearable.

Then it stopped—just as suddenly as it had begun, leaving her with light spots across her vision. She gasped frantically, sucking in air.

"What are you doing to me?" The question was so close to a sob.

The labcoat tsked. "Jane, Jane, Jane. You could never begin to understand."

"The tasing, jackass!" she shouted.

"Actually, a taser runs off about zero-point-zero-zero-two-one amps at average performance," he replied calmly. "But that's child's play. What you just experienced is closer comparatively to touching a power line." He indicated her side. "Those tubes are your lifeline. No surface burns, no permanent neurological damage, no organ failure. Just allows you to feel...our full disappointment, when you don't follow our instructions."

"I was just asking a question, you sadistic son of a bitch!" Jane seethed, and almost wished she hadn't.

Blinding—blinding pain. No air. She could feel her blood inside her—it felt like it was straining out of her veins.

Then, again, it stopped, just as abruptly as before. The noise that escaped Jane was definitely a sob this time. She strained against her restraints. No wonder she could feel the pain everywhere—between the restraints and the claws, she was one giant conductor from at least a dozen entry points.

"You should thank me, you know." Howard tapped the tank beside her. "It's my solution. Without it, you'd be dead and unrecognisable by now."

"I wonder why you're not selling it over the counter!" she spat, tears running from the corners of her eyes.

He shook his head censoriously, wiping them away with the back of his finger. "We don't want that, Jane. The aim is to keep you as dry as possible. If only you could remember... It can be so much more unpleasant than this."

She trembled involuntarily and shied away from his touch. It wasn't from fear as much as shellshock.

And hatred. She was afraid, obviously, but the fear paled against her hatred. She thought of throwing him across the room; imagined squeezing his brain until he dropped dead on the arctic floor.

Enough thinking.

She splayed her fingers, pouring all her power—ever trace of it—into pulling his blood through his skin like she would pull a needle through a cross-stitch—a million needles, all at once.

And agony erupted.

Fire.

Ice.

Outer space. No air. Vacuum. Sheer absence.

God, pain.

Jane felt the claws digging into her side as her back seized and arched, and she could now certainly feel the presence of the tubes inside her.

It stopped, and, at this point, she was beyond caring if she wept.

"You didn't think we hadn't thought of that?" Howard mocked her. "You want to know the best part of all of this, Jane?"

Jane gritted her teeth, saying nothing.

"The best part..." he said slowly. "Is that I'm not even flipping the switch. Those electrodes on your head... Your brain is monitoring your psychological defiance and is processing your own punishment. You are literally bringing this on yourself!"

He took her chin in his fingers and pushed it back to face the centre screen before her.

"Just watch the presentation and follow the prompts. It's very simple; no need for pain. You always learn, you know. You're always disobedient for a time, but, eventually, you understand: it's better this way. This isn't real—it's just a game. It's better just to play."

Jane swallowed as the recordings started rolling again.

"The less you resist..." His fingers stroked along her throat and tapped the metal restraint that held her down. "...the sooner you won't feel the need. Then, you can forget. It'll be like this never happened."

His words echoed, but Jane was losing touch, with them and the room around her.

Bleach—it wasn't an image like the rest, but she could smell it; it was burning her nostrils.

Bones cracking against tiles. A woman crying, begging. Stinging palms as she crawled on broken china.

The shrill electric whining of a dentist's drill. Jane could feel the vibrations in her teeth—in her very soul. The drill tunnelling deeper and deeper.

An old woman sucking and coughing on a tube. Wrinkled, shaking hands.

Paper-thin skin. Eggplant purple bruises.

Screaming. A baby crying.

Echoes of anguish.

Jane didn't know how long passed by before she realised that some of these recordings were actually animated. The quality of the artistry was like nothing she had ever seen before. It was staggering—they were almost impossible to separate from the real ones.

This isn't real. This is just a game.

This isn't real. This is just a game.

This isn't real. This is just a game.

Forget.

You can forget.

Never happened.

She was in the void.

Or, at least, it looked like the void. It felt like the void. All around her was darkness, but instead of silence, she could hear drums.

Water slopped around her ankles and she realised she wasn't just skimming this void now—walking on water like she wasn't really quite here; she was as corporeal as hailstones in a storm.

As corporeal as the hundreds of gravestones surrounding her now.

But they weren't gravestones.

Jane waded forward to see that they were rows—endless rows—of upstanding blocks of wood. They were all perfectly aligned, perfectly chopped. She stood amongst them like the only one not to belong, a tiny distracting speck in the overall picture, otherwise flawless, ordered and unmarred.

The drums were growing louder, but Jane could hear a rushing sound—like heavy rain, or a cascading waterfall. The drums were everywhere, but the rushing...

She turned.

Flickering in the distance. She didn't know how she could see darkness flickering within darkness, but, then again, she didn't know how she could see these posts, how she could see herself. The void was hers, after all. She'd never needed to explain it before. It wasn't another dimension or the gap between or somewhere others could go...

It was inside her.

It was how she found things.

That was the extent of her rationalisation of it, after all these years—it was how she'd explained it to Mike and Will and Steve and Hopper.

So, if that was all it was—if it was just how she found things—then what was she doing here now? What was she looking for?

What were these posts? Why were they here?

If they were here, then where was she?

The rushing was growing louder, the flickering growing more frantic. And closer. So much closer.

It was like shards of black ice glinting in the distance as they spun through the air toward her.

That's it, she realised. They were spinning toward her. All of them. It was like she had a bull's eye painted across her chest.

The drums were deafening. She could barely hear herself breathe over the rushing.

Shards, flying right for her.

Jane turned. She ran.

For how long could she outrun them? She'd never been the fastest runner in reality. What was she like here? She'd never really tried.

But again, the void was inside. If it belonged to her, then so did the shards. But they were sharp, deadly. Still coming at her.

If they were hers, then why could they cut her to ribbons? Why would they?

Inside or not, Jane could feel a very real stitch spiking in her side—the worst stitch she'd ever had. It was like her insides were tearing. Her legs screamed and her heart hammered and she could feel pain all over. Fire everywhere. It felt like running in the desert, flashing between night and day—bitter cold and scorching.

How fast can you run away from your own mind, Jane? she asked herself. How fast can you run?

How fast can you run?

She could feel the drums beating through her and the water shook and shuddered. The rushing reached the height of its crescendo and Jane glanced behind her, knowing there wasn't enough time.

She couldn't run. She couldn't outrun.

She'd never been a runner anyway.

The shards sliced into her, swarming her like insects. She screamed.

"Jane! Janie!"

Arms restrained her as Jane fought her way out of the darkness. She could feel warm wetness on her cheeks and down her jaw, and her throat was raw from crying.

She clutched sleeves and, under them, strong forearms. She could hear herself gasping—blubbering, even—before her stinging eyes found Dustin's; serene, calming blue—the kind of blue you could never doubt.

She was trembling, half-upright in her terror, and she let her

forehead fall against his chest. He cradled her to him.

"We've really got to stop meeting like this," he murmured, hushing her gently.

Jane heard the front door creak open and closed and then the rustling of shopping bags in the kitchen. Steve's voice rang out as he came toward the bedroom.

"Okay, I've unpacked the rest of it. Is she—" He stopped in the doorway, reading the room. "What happened?"

Dustin shook his head almost imperceptibly but Jane felt it against her hair. She eased away from him, leaning against the wall and pulling the sheets over her.

"Welling," she eventually managed.

Steve came to sit on her other side. "What about him?"

She closed her eyes, shaking her head. She already had so many memories she wished she could forget, but now, without even leaving bed, she'd managed to stumble upon yet another? It was like losing every dice roll in Vegas.

"He's been working with Ford all along," she said hollowly. "The sleepwalking... It was just another effect of the Phluctine, like we thought. It just..."

How could she even begin to explain?

"Brown Eyes?" Steve prompted softly, and Jane felt his hand on hers.

She glanced his way. "I don't know for how long, or if it was only the times Hopper found me wandering, but I was in some drug haze... I couldn't remember where I'd been."

"But you remember now?" he asked.

She nodded bitterly. "A lab. I don't know where, but it could've been underground—it had no windows. With some woman's funding, I was his guinea pig for some subliminal messaging experiment."

"Well, that makes sense," Dustin acknowledged regretfully. "I mean, they couldn't have gotten you to do any of the things they did without an indoctrination program of some kind."

"But it doesn't make sense!" Jane insisted. "All this time, I thought it was the Periphax that was the root of this, whatever this is! It was only after the Periphax that I became a candidate! It's the only thing that ties all Ford's victims together, but I wasn't even on it when the sleepwalking was happening—just the Phluctine! And on top of that, that was sophomore year—nineteen-eighty-seven! I didn't even meet Welling before I was committed two years later!"

Steve squeezed her hand. "Except apparently you did, Brown Eyes."

She shook her head, pushing her hair out of her face. She felt sick.

Steve noticed. "Are you okay?"

Again, she shook her head, only more animatedly this time, and threw herself off the bed.

She collapsed over the toilet bowl in the bathroom just as vomit came spewing out of her mouth. There wasn't much to it—it wasn't like she'd eaten much in the last twelve hours.

Speaking of.

She turned her face to see the boys loitering in the bathroom doorway, and frowned. "What time is it?"

Steve checked his watch. "Just after eight. Why? Mike told you we were coming, right?"

"I slept all day," Jane realised aloud.

"Probably a good thing." Dustin tried to find the silver lining. "You were overdue for a decent rest."

Jane winced, her head aching dully.

"Slept through most of the hangover," she muttered, finding a silver lining of her own.

"By the way, Janie," Dustin remembered suddenly. "Will said he's sorry he couldn't come tonight. He's got a huge presentation for the Design director first thing, but he'll come straight after work tomorrow. He's called dibs on the shift."

"Shift?" she echoed.

He nodded, gesturing to Steve. "Yeah, we were talking about it last night. Now that it's not safe at our place, we're all going to rotate shifts staying here with you."

"Babysitting me," Jane translated.

"It's not a big deal," he insisted. "You just said it yourself—you spent the whole day passed out. I know, ordinarily, you can take care of yourself and literally anyone stupid enough to try to hurt you, but, face it, you're not yourself right now. It's not your fault, but it's also nothing to be ashamed about. We're your family; we're here for you."

Jane sighed. "Fine. It makes sense. So who's my knight in shining armour tonight? You?" Her gaze flicked over to Steve. "Or you?"

They both looked awkward all of a sudden.

"Actually, we've both got big days tomorrow, too," Dustin hedged.

Jane glanced between them and knew where this was going. "No."

Dustin grimaced apologetically. "He's the only one with a pretty clear plate in the morning."

Jane's jaw locked, her response stiff. "Of course."

"But hey," Steve piped up. "You spent all of yesterday together. I'm sure you managed to work through some of your issues, right?"

As if on cue, Jane felt an uncomfortable throb and evaded the question.

"So, you did speak to Mike today?"

"Briefly."

Dustin's expression was openly blank, if a little on edge. Clearly there'd been no mention of last night's antics, or she'd be able to read it all over his face.

"He told us about Mayor Culkin. Gonna have to get in touch with Bee sooner rather than later."

"I remember the needles," Jane said. "Or I think I do—a flash of them, at least. Unless they were the only imagined thing in a slew of real memories, I think our theory must be right."

"You really think you killed him?" Steve asked quietly.

Jane met his eyes. "I really think I did."

"I just don't get it." He shook his head. "You killed Culkin, they wanted office—I get that. The connection's pretty clear. But then if they were already testing their program on you before the Periphax—before the candidacy—what was *that* for?"

"That's exactly what I said not five minutes ago."

He held up his hands. "Okay, Madam Hopper. Full credit for the question goes to you."

Jane rolled her eyes. "We're going to have to talk to one of them sooner or later, you know. Informed conjecture only gets us so far. I was going to go straight for Ford but as far as I can tell from what I remember, the bitch in charge seemed to want him out ASAP. I think Welling's our guy."

"Which will mean breaking into Central State." Dustin looked at her like she might still be dragging her feet toward sobriety. "Janie, think about what you're saying."

"And think about how many other options we have left!" she fired back. "Think about what happens the longer we wait to finish this! People could be dying every day—we don't know!"

He watched her carefully, but she saw a sadness in his eyes. He of all people couldn't argue with that.

Without really having another option over which to reach an accord, the matter seemed to be settled. Will and Mike could weigh in later.

At the thought of Mike, Jane realised she wanted to take another shower before he arrived. Her mouth felt furry, and she was dying for a glass of water. A full routine of ablutions was in order while she still had the time. Not that she expected anything like last night to happen again, but she at least wanted to feel clean if she was going to feel like crap for the rest of the night. Flawless logic.

Pushing herself up from the floor in front of the toilet, she ushered the boys out and opted to start with her teeth. Her breath stank of vomit and alcohol.

She could hear Dustin and Steve in the kitchen, joking around and insulting each other—second nature to them now, it seemed.

Once she'd brushed and flossed, Jane closed the door partially. She would have felt more comfortable shutting it all the way but one burst of hot water in this bathroom turned it into a choking hotbox. She'd learned that the night before—lack of ventilation was an understatement.

But it wasn't an issue. Dustin and Steve were like the brothers who'd never *want* to look. Not that she had much going on at the moment anyway.

Stripping down and stepping into the bath, Jane tried to remember the last time she'd been fully naked in front of anyone—in a sexual context, that was. Privacy at CSH was pretty non-existent.

She'd never done more than push her panties down for Scott Keegan, and Mike...

With Mike, she realised, the last time had been in his basement one night in sophomore year, when they'd recreated her blanket fort.

God, had it been that long? It couldn't have been. They'd fucked like rabbits right up until the end—even when Mike was home sick with a fever of one hundred and two. Granted, she'd done most of the work that time, but still. Surely once in two years she'd actually taken her

clothes off?

She racked her brain but couldn't recall. Not one time. There'd been a lot of panties-to-the-side moments, which she'd always attributed to their enduring attraction and the countless resultant 'need you know' situations in which they'd found themselves. That period had been the height of her button-down phase as well, so the extent of her nudity usually only involved a few ripped buttons. But no; no birthday suits. Surely that wasn't normal?

Jane frowned, glancing down.

And she saw them.

Six puncture scars—each about the diameter of a thick drinking straw—lined up her side, with six matching thinner scars running directly parallel. The second set were more like nicks, deeper at the front and then dragging down toward the larger scars. Like she'd arched into the inflicting object.

Jane studied them, feeling vaguely numb.

Logically, she should have realised they'd be there—now, at least. But it was just too surreal. Six years since she estimated her after-dark horrors with Welling occurred, and she was only just noticing the scars now?

How could she only be noticing them now? How strong had their hold on her been?

Had it simply been a matter of telling her once that the physical damage didn't exist, or was it a more regular thing? Had it been part of therapy and she just couldn't remember because they didn't want her to?

But now, all of a sudden, she could—the important things, at least. She was remembering more and more. It seemed she couldn't avoid it now—some new horror rose up out of the dark every time she closed her eyes. Because the drugs were finally wearing off? Or for some other reason?

It sounded so easy, so simple—close your eyes and have everything

become clear—but Jane knew the dark underbelly of that deal. She knew she couldn't stop now—there was too much at stake—but she couldn't help feeling like, despite how bad things had been as they were without answers, remembering was worse.

It was selfish, she knew, but all the pain, all the horror—she didn't want to endure it again. What if what she remembered now wasn't the worst? What if, sometime soon, she closed her eyes and remembered murdering the mayor? Stabbing him with needles, watching the life drain from his eyes... It was like watching Hopper die—she'd been powerless to stop it then, and, no matter how many times she relived it now, she could do nothing to change it. What if there was more—more she didn't even have an inkling about at this point?

And, even more selfishly, what if that 'more' contained the sort of suffering she encountered last night: her own personal suffering? Tubes forced inside her, electrocution, shards of glass... She had felt all of that. Even as echoes of the past, those memories had proven excruciating.

Her fingers traced the scars gingerly, like she half expected them to still hurt.

Not only was she only just seeing them now but she'd entirely subconsciously kept Mike from seeing them for two years. What else had she hidden in plain sight without even knowing? If she threw herself further down this rabbit hole, how much more deception would she find?

Mike had looked at her like a stranger at Fause. She'd understood it then, from his viewpoint, as much as it had hurt—as much as it had felt like the realisation of a fear she'd ignored for the longest time.

But now she felt a deeper fear.

What about her was even real anymore?

She turned off the shower, feeling drained, like somehow its heat had sucked what little energy she had left out of her. Then she felt a slight prickle at the nape of her neck, like a deer in the forest sensing

intrusion, and looked up.

Mike stood half inside the doorway, his fingers still curled around the door's edge as he leaned into it. His watch glinted in the fluorescent light.

Jane met his eyes, a mixture of caution, love and outrage swirling in her gut. She wasn't sure which emotion won out over her face.

Mike's expression was blank at first, giving nothing away as he took in her coffee stare; her parted lips, breathing quietly unsure; her blonde hair, sticking wetly to her neck and shoulders. Briefly, dark intensity spiked as his gaze grazed over the red spot on her breast, but he didn't dwell.

For a moment, Jane forgot that she was a road map of experimentation and abuse. She just wanted his eyes to delve deeper, feeling so vulnerable and alive under his gaze that he may as well have been touching her. A shiver built up her spine and released gooseflesh down her arms and legs. Her nipples peaked and she felt that all too familiar need for him stir deep inside her.

They were nothing but their issues at the moment—how could she forget?—but there was something so safe about feeling vulnerable in front of Mike. Maybe that was the heart of her problem—how could they grow back together as they were now if she was just desperately trying to relive the bliss of the past?

Especially when some of that bliss had clearly been a lie.

As if he could hear her thoughts, Mike's expression grew shadowed, his eyes sparking with doubt, distrust—even anger.

Jane realised he'd found her scars.

He stepped inside, slowly, focused, closing the door behind him. Jane stiffened as he came closer—until he was standing at the edge of the bath and he reached forward to touch her—and he paused, glancing at her eyes.

She didn't know whether it was because she didn't want him to touch her or because she did and didn't trust her reasons, but Jane knew

that after last night, regardless, he didn't deserve to right now.

It was a moment of clarity as to what they had become. They weren't hopeless—she refused to believe that—but they weren't who they'd used to be. She knew they never would be again but the idea of building a new future together from here was as confusing as it was challenging to imagine. She wanted to—she had no doubt—but where to go from here?

It really was growing harder and harder to keep the faith.

Carefully, Jane climbed out of the tub and wrapped a towel around herself. Mike didn't move, not even to face her. He just stood there with his fists balled at his sides, breathing slow, staring at the air where only seconds ago, her scars had been.

It was so unnerving, being this close to him yet so far away. Four years ago, Jane would have thought it impossible. They were El and Mike.

But now, what were they?

Not wanting to agonise over the answer yet again, Jane realised just how much she didn't want to be in here. Not with *him*. Not with everything that they were and weren't and all the uncertainty about what they could or couldn't be.

She turned to flee, and suddenly Mike snapped back to life.

Her hand was on the doorknob when she felt him suddenly behind her. His body ran the length of hers—she could feel him against her everywhere—and he towered over her as he flattened his hand against the door over her shoulder, holding it closed.

She could use her power to throw him off, but she knew he knew that she would never. She'd promised years ago, she would never.

She felt his cheek against her ear, dry against damp. She felt his other hand through her towel, holding her to him. Her feet were apart on the cold tiles. Her skin was still hot from the shower but she could feel how she was burning, the sharp sting of the cold air curling up under her towel making it impossible to ignore his breath against her

throat as he turned his face slightly into her or how he pulled her tighter against him, like there could be no space between.

It was impossible to ignore. It *felt* impossible to resist. All she wanted was to let go of the knob, take his hand that was on her, and drag it down—make him find her. Make him remember. Make her come apart.

But she couldn't. She realised now, she *should* have told him 'no' last night. It was still too soon. Maybe this was one way to find each other, but they had to *talk*. They had to heal.

This—what she felt on the brink of right now—would never work. They would only hurt each other more.

She turned her head a fraction, pressing her cheek against his as she whispered indignantly, "What, are you going to have me here, too?"

His chest rose and fell in deep, powerful breaths against her back and, for a moment, she thought he might say 'yes'—might throw off her towel and make her his again as he crushed her against the door.

But he let her go, wordlessly. He released the door and she slammed it between them before finding Dustin's laundry bag in the bedroom and throwing on a pair of baggy pyjama pants and an old, well-loved Rolling Stones T-shirt that Jane guessed had been Mrs Henderson's in a previous life.

When she came out to the kitchen, Mike was standing there with Dustin and Steve, silent and vaguely disgruntled but otherwise acting like nothing had happened.

Seeing her, Steve spoke first.

"So, Brown Eyes, there's dinner on the stove. Now that Mike's here, Dustin and I are probably going to head off, so... You'll be all right?"

Jane crossed her arms over her chest as she stood on the other side of the bench from the three of them, and she glanced at Mike. He looked away.

"I'll be fine."

Steve picked his coat off the bench and came around to kiss her on the cheek. "Don't blow me away with conviction."

Dustin gave her a quick one-armed hug as he followed behind Steve and, five seconds later, they were gone, locking the door behind them.

Jane turned reluctantly back to Mike, the wide berth of the bench standing between them. They were a mirror image of each other: arms crossed, measured expressions, stubborn stances.

Jane chewed on her lip for a moment before she broke the silence.

"So..."

Mike held her eyes and after a moment, his expression faltered. Some of the tension in his shoulders relaxed and he looked at her like he might actually want to hold a conversation tonight after all.

It wasn't an overwhelming leap toward recovery, but it wasn't nothing.

Jane still wasn't sold he had his priorities straight, though. She wondered if he even had priorities or if this was still just too surreal for him that he was taking it day by day, minute by minute... Impulse by impulse.

Eyes on her mouth, he replied huskily, "So."

Okay, so, doubt me not—I know Mike is acting super caveman-y at the moment and I'm sure his mood swings are getting to a lot of people, but bear with me, because the next few chapters are very Mileven-centric while still rolling the plot forward. Among other things, he'll finally properly speak to her. Crazy, right?

Also, I've been thinking recently that with the pretty consistent heaviness of this fic, you guys might be interested in reading some lighter stories? I'm not going to prioritise that over this story—I've kept you waiting for too long to suddenly put this on the backburner, and that's not what I want anyway—but I was thinking even just some one-shots about memories Jane mentions in passing

in TRWD. For example, when Mike is home sick as mentioned in this chapter. Would you guys be interested if I occasionally popped up anything like that? Would you have any suggestions, if so? I'm always keen to try to give you what you want while staying as true as I can to the characters. E.g. I'm not going to write Mike and El as rival gang leaders. Although... haha

Anyways, review, PM me, favourite. You know the drill. I just love the feedback and it reminds me you're all real, I guess? Weird thing to say, I know, but the whole online community thing is new to me. Each review, it's like, "Real people are reading my story!" :P

Okay, enough from me. Happy weekend everyone!

-Inara x

10. Nicotine

AN:

So.

Haha How are we all?

I do apologise in advance for the length of this chapter. It's not actually the longest by far, but considering that it's basically six thousand words of Mike and El hashing out their issues, I just thought I'd give the heads up. Lots and lots of angst in this one. LOTS.

Well, anyway, won't beat a dead horse any longer. Enjoy!

-Inara x

**EDIT: Okay, in the cold light of day, have tweaked the chapter a bit. No massive changes, but just re-shaped bits and pieces and added a few more lines of dialogue. Just letting any returning visitors know. :)*

Ten Nicotine

Every exchange was fraught with expectations.

It was the first real lesson about communication that Jane had ever learned. She hadn't needed a personal look outside Hawkins Lab to recognise that indisputably. Papa had always needed something—everyone had always needed *something*.

It was only after she had escaped that she amended it to 'every exchange with purpose.' Small talk was not something she had encountered prior, but she quickly came to understand it as the human race's most banal and frivolous invention. It lacked any and all value—either by wasting both parties' time on a train going nowhere or by prolonging the tension before the inevitable confrontation of an issue.

Or, in their case right now, the inevitable confrontation of many.

Mike had never been one for small talk. Since she'd met him, Jane had never wanted nor needed it. Small talk was a safety net, and they'd never wavered from complete free fall. But that was when they'd been a team—when they'd trusted each other.

Jane couldn't claim she didn't trust him now, but she knew the feeling wasn't reciprocated. No free fall, but no safety net.

The silence itself was their exchange—achieving nothing, advancing nothing, yet so fraught with risk that they scarcely dared to breathe too deeply.

And so it stretched between.

Jane had started the dialogue—what felt like eons ago now. She mildly wanted to bash herself now; why—*why*—had she said "so" if she had nothing with which to follow it up?

He'd echoed her; he'd looked at her with a hint of longing, a thousand questions, and enough doubt to turn her blood cold. But now what?

Time was slipping by.

It was, in the end, Jane's traitorous stomach protesting its long-suffered neglect that overthrew the finely tuned equilibrium of tension in the room.

The noise briefly distracted from the overload of expectations hanging over them, as dangerous as icicles, and Jane skirted around Mike to ladle herself some soup.

Taking a seat back on her side of the bench, she asked finally, "You're not hungry?"

He watched her spoon clinking against the sides of the bowl as she stirred the steaming broth before shaking his head slightly. "I ate earlier."

"At the office?"

He shot her a look. "Does it matter where?"

His sharp glare made her shift her attention back to her dinner. "I guess not."

"Except it does." He crossed his arms. "I can hear it in your voice."

She slammed her spoon down exasperatedly. "Jesus! I'm sorry I asked you one question about your day!"

She hadn't been expecting to lose her cool so quickly, but Jane had enough Mike-related concerns than to let his continued unwarranted aggression be one of them. Maybe they weren't the team they'd used to be, but they were meant to be on the same side. Every chance he got, it was like he wanted an excuse to be enemies.

Jane didn't want to be his enemy—it was almost physically painful being so at odds with him—but she couldn't keep this up; she couldn't walk on eggshells forever.

It seemed he hadn't been expecting the sudden change in demeanour either.

The silence surged up again, and Jane felt for a moment as if they were underwater. Maybe she would have preferred it that way—then they couldn't have talked even if they'd wanted to. She could have pretended they'd wanted to.

Finally, Mike sighed.

"I ate at home," he said. "One of my roommates cooked pasta."

Jane paused a moment before asking, "Are you eating enough?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Who are you, my mom?"

"I'm just asking," she said quietly.

Another minute passed. Eventually Mike caved, grabbing himself a bowl.

"So," he tried again, blowing on his first spoonful. "Where do we

start?"

"Where do you want to start?" she asked.

He shrugged. "The obvious?"

"You're going to have to be more specific." Another mouthful. "That could mean any number of things."

"I think those scars are pretty obvious," he said flatly.

She held his gaze stubbornly for a second before conceding. "Fair enough."

"You want to explain them?" he prompted. "They don't exactly look new."

"They're not," she confirmed, using another mouthful of soup to buy herself a second to think. Where to begin? "I've had them for years."

"How many years?"

She watched him carefully, on alert for any minute reaction. "About six."

"Six...?" His disbelief drove him to silence. He was paler than usual.

Jane knew what he was thinking:

When you and I were still together.

When we were happy.

How could you have those if we were happy?

Did he feel guilty?

Jane didn't want him to feel guilty—not for that. Not for much.

Did he feel like she did, like the butt of some horrible cosmic joke?

He cleared his throat, the look on his face breaking Jane's heart. "Well, wasn't I the world's shittiest boyfriend?"

Jane didn't think she'd ever felt soberer in her life. "You weren't. I hid them from you."

His eyes flashed as he looked back at her. Jane couldn't tell if it was just confusion or if there was anger there, too.

"Why?"

She shook her head. "I didn't know I was doing it. I didn't even remember I had them until tonight. Yet another gift imparted by Welling."

"Wait, Welling?" He pushed his bowl to the side, done with the charade of sharing a meal. "I thought he was at CSH?"

"He was." She sighed. "He *is*. He just... Turns out I met him a long time before."

Mike nodded measuredly, taking it all in as efficiently as he dared. "And what exactly did that entail?"

Jane bit her lip. "You remember my sleepwalking, right?"

"Obviously." He seemed offended that she could have any doubt, but at the same time apprehensive.

She decided to just rip off the bandaid.

"Turns out I was going to a lab for experiments then brainwashed to forget. I'm still not too clear on the 'how' of it all, but I think it was a combination of Ford's drugs and Welling's behaviour modifying conditioning."

"Behaviour modifying?" Mike echoed.

"They didn't like it when I didn't obey." She couldn't hold his eyes. "They got pretty good at making sure I didn't like it either."

"El..."

It sounded half like a question, but Jane could tell he was scared. He wanted her to elaborate—obviously, he wanted to know the truth—

but she didn't blame him for being uncertain. Hell, last night she'd been afraid to go to sleep. How completely screwed up their lives had become...

"Electric shock," she explained dully. "He had this whole apparatus set up to make sure I didn't fry. That's what the scars are from."

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, she adjusted her T-shirt over them, ensuring it was baggy and gave no shape away. She wanted them to be invisible again. She didn't want to forget, but it wasn't exactly like she was all too keen to remember. She just wanted them to go away.

"There were screens," she recalled aloud, her voice sounding as distant as she felt, seeing them around her once again. "Lots of screens with images—layers of video. They were teaching me."

"Teaching you what?" he urged on a breath.

"He told me it never made a difference, no matter what I did." She swallowed thickly, feeling as if she were losing herself again. Staring straight ahead, she saw through Mike—saw Welling's face. "He said, 'The less you resist, the sooner you won't feel the need.'" Her eyes pricked with tears but she ignored them. "Like it never happened."

She glanced up at Mike, hearing the emptiness in her own voice and seeing plain on his face how he had heard it, too.

But even he seemed far away.

"Like it never happened," she repeated, feeling a heavy slowness in her chest—like her heart was struggling.

Was this what it felt like then? She'd felt hopelessness before, but that was when she'd been alone. She never thought she could feel this way with the party, with Mike—the notion had never even crossed her mind.

And yet, here it was, weighing her down like rocks in her guts.

She was underwater again, but this time she was sinking.

Bracing both hands against the counter, Mike asked again, more

firmly this time, "El, teaching you what?"

Jane studied his chest—the stillness of it. She realised he really was afraid to breathe.

"Not just to obey," she murmured. "To want what they wanted."

Easing out a breath, she dropped her voice lower.

"To play the game."

It wasn't immediate, but something about her choice of words clouded Mike's sombre expression.

"To play the game?" he echoed, his eyes narrowing.

He wasn't, for once, frowning at *her*, but his expression grew increasingly severe as Jane watched his mind work. She'd always been able to see it, like she had an all-access pass through his eyes to his brain. She'd always felt so proud of him; she'd known from the start that he was brilliant. No matter what they were grappling with—whether it was an evil lab or demogorgons or, hell, AP Chemistry, eventually, he always figured it out.

Always.

"El, what do you remember about the screens?"

She blinked. "Not a lot. None of the clips were pleasant—I remember that. It was weird, though." She shook her head. "It was like...at some point, it wasn't what I was seeing anymore that was important. It was...what I was feeling? Like, there were no speakers, but I could hear things. I could smell things..." She met his eyes. "Mike, I could taste things."

"What things?" His voice was as low as hers.

She suppressed a tremor, her voice hollow. "Fear."

She remembered the crying, the begging. Broken bones and broken china. Blood. A neglected child.

"Mike, I don't think any of it was fake," she whispered. "Some of the images, they weren't real—they were animated—but I *felt* them: a dying old woman, an abused wife. I think, even a murder victim—at one point, it was like I was choking on bleach. It's hard to explain but some things, I saw happening. Others... Others were happening *to* me."

"And those were the ones that weren't real?" he clarified. "They were animated?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I can't remember—separating them was really hard."

She rubbed her eyes tiredly. How could she be tired? She'd slept all day.

"But I know what I felt." Shattered china flashed through her mind and she turned her palms up, half expecting to find blood. "I know they're not mine but, animated or not, I think those experiences belonged to someone. I don't know to whom, and I don't know to how many, but I think Welling and whoever's been bankrolling him have been making these memories happen and then...duplicating them somehow?" Seeing Mike's expression, she dropped her face into her hands. "I know. It sounds crazy."

"It does."

She heard him sigh.

"But..."

She glanced up.

He looked torn.

"I mean, we're down the rabbit hole now, right?" He offered a half-hearted smile. It barely qualified, but it was probably the closest he'd come to a supportive expression since he'd seen her again. "Crazy's starting to make sense at this point."

"Mike, can I ask you a question?" she asked suddenly.

Immediately, any distance he'd closed between them opened up as he pulled back, and his eyes were immediately guarded, his expressive eyebrows drawing together. "I guess."

She didn't want to create distance again, not when they were finally talking—properly talking—but she had to know.

"While I was gone," she prefaced. "Did you ever... Did you ever think maybe I wasn't guilty?"

His guarded eyes turned cold, but the faint waver in his voice betrayed him. "You can't ask me that."

Jane couldn't help herself, reaching for his hand across the counter. "Mike—"

He whipped it away, turning his back on her, pacing to the other side of the kitchen. All five steps away.

He stared at the floor, then the ceiling, raking his fingers through his hair as Jane watched in loaded silence.

She wondered how he'd react if she walked around to him. She could picture it: sliding off her stool, rounding the counter, reaching for his forearm, turning him gently... She could imagine him angry, but she could also imagine catching him in a moment of doubt—not in her, this time, but in the walls he kept building. Maybe he'd allow her to come in close, to cradle his face, to tell him he was safe—safe with her, safe from her. She'd go back to confinement before she'd hurt him again.

Maybe.

She didn't get to find out.

Two counts passed and then he spun on the spot, cutting straight toward the front door and shutting it hard behind him.

Jane sat there deliberating: run after him or wait?

It would have been a lie to say that his unerring volatility wasn't growing wearisome. She wasn't a saint in all of this, Jane knew, but

she couldn't help feeling sick of saying sorry and nothing else. It wasn't fair anymore. But she had known upon seeing him—hell, at just the prospect of seeing him again—that she'd have a lot to explain. She knew how much she'd hurt him; the cheating and the lying and the callous spite were enough to make her stomach heave at the mere memory. She knew that healing would take time—for him, even more so than most. He'd lost more than just a girlfriend four years ago; he'd lost faith.

But he wasn't going to find it again if she just kept on sitting here.

Stalking into the bedroom, she grabbed the crocheted throw from the night before, threw it around herself, and beelined back to the front door. Ripping it open, she staggered to a sudden stop on the unwelcome mat.

He was right there; facing away from her, leaning on the iron railing.

Jane couldn't believe what she was seeing.

He was *smoking*.

Besides the obvious health risks—and Mike was goddamned smart enough to appreciate the gravity of those—Jane just couldn't rationalise it in her mind.

Mike.

Smoking.

There he was, in tan corduroys and a form-fitting geometric grey sweater. The ensemble had Karen written all over it—Jane had no doubt it had been gifted to him, probably in lieu of some computer game or A/V device. Mike had never given a flying fuck about what he wore, which was probably why it seemed like his mother still dressed him at twenty-two: all the clothes he owned were pre-devised outfits.

That was Mike.

Jane knew she hadn't seen him in four years but there were some

things that just didn't change, no matter how much time passed.

For example, he'd suaved up his hair a bit—no more adorable bowl cut—but the sheer volume remained, flopping around and even into his face. It was even a little curly now.

As little as Mike cared about his appearance overall, Jane remembered how difficult he'd always been when the time for 'start of a new school year' haircuts rolled around. Before he moved to Indianapolis, Jonathan had always driven Mike and Will and Jane had always gone along for the ride. Upon arrival, Mike would actually still appear fairly serene. But come his turn, it had been like trying to wrestle an alligator into the barber's chair.

Ugly sweaters and mass amounts of hair.

Sweet, awkward professions of love.

Secret confidence that only came out when he let go.

Dungeons & Dragons.

Riding the clutch for two years before he broke the habit.

In all the time Jane had known him, that and skipping study hall to make out with her in his car had been his worst habits.

That was Mike.

This, on the other hand, wasn't.

"Are you kidding me?" she demanded, coming to stand beside him and staring at the cigarette between his lips.

She wasn't angry, exactly—more dismayed.

He drew deeply from it and held the breath in, not looking at her, then released a long stream of snowy white smoke into the bracing night air.

He flicked ash over the railing.

"Oh, and what, I got you back perfect?" he muttered.

She gaped at him. "Got me back?"

He rolled his eyes, bringing the fag back up to his lips. "It's not a big deal, El."

"Put it out," she ordered.

He scoffed. "Or what, you're going to make me?"

"You know I could!"

He laughed humourlessly and glanced down over the railing. They were standing directly above his car.

"Yeah, but you wouldn't."

She took one last step toward him, erasing the distance. Her fingers locked tightly around his wrist and the sudden contact made him tense.

"It's been a long time since I made that promise," she hissed. "Do you know what I could do to you?"

"Yeah, well." He glanced at her grip on his wrist and the nonchalance that followed sounded painfully manufactured. "We both already know what I can do to you."

The first response Jane had had ready evaporated with her breath. She felt as though he'd slapped her.

Somehow—she had no idea how—she managed to find her voice. "I could've stopped you."

"But you *didn't*."

It was strange; it was almost as if he were accusing her. But of what?

She set her shoulders. "No. I didn't."

"And why was that, exactly?" he spat, rounding on her with blazing eyes.

Jane couldn't believe they were arguing about this, but now he wasn't the only one glaring.

"You know, that's a fucking good question, with the way you're acting now." She flared up. "Hell, with the way you acted last night! What *was* that disappearing act, Mike? There I was, cherishing the five seconds that you let me in, but as soon as you were done, it was 'trousers up!' and out the door! I *never* in a million years thought you were the type."

"Okay, it was more than five seconds," he muttered.

Jane didn't stop to think. She slapped him—hard.

"I did *not* spend four years locked up like some animal so you could punish me like one!" she seethed. "'Ride 'em hard and put 'em away wet'? Works for horses—why not the bitch who broke you? Was that your way of thinking?"

Jane knew she was really blowing up the issue now—she knew, in the moment, Mike probably hadn't actually thought about it that hard—but it was *because* he hadn't thought about it that she was mad.

He was staring at her now with gleaming eyes that she decided were mostly rage-filled, but that became increasingly less clear as she pressed on.

"You just had to 'get yours', didn't you? Is that how you treat all girls now, or just the ones you feel have wronged you in some way? You didn't even have the decency to stick around and lift me off the floor! You just *fucked off* and went God knows where—"

"I WAS RIGHT HERE!" he burst out.

The outburst came out of nowhere. One second, Mike was standing there, the very picture of silent fury; the next, he was bellowing.

Jane faltered, stunned confusion bringing her up short, but only for a second before she collected herself. "I'm pretty sure I would have noticed if you were on the other side of the door!"

"I made it to the bottom of the stairs!" he snarled. "I even almost

made it to my car!"

Still livid, she didn't believe him. "And then you made it there and you drove off!"

"No, I didn't!" he snapped, setting his jaw stubbornly like he always used to do. "I stood on the bottom step for over an hour trying to decide whether to come back up or not!"

Jane's distrustful frown lost some of its edge. "You did?"

He rolled his eyes—more, it seemed, at himself—and conceded reluctantly, "Yeah."

Jane opened her mouth, trying to shape a response, but she was drawing a blank.

Mike shook his head, exhaling long and slow and turning back to the railing. "You know, I talked to Nancy just last week. She thinks she's pregnant. She hasn't told Jonathan yet."

Caught off-guard by the sudden change in subject, Jane was still grappling for an appropriate response when he continued, "They got married last fall. For two people who've gone through so much crap, you'd think I could be happy for them for one day—just *one* day!"

Jane frowned. "Are you saying you weren't?"

He tilted his head from side to side, as if weighing his options. "I wouldn't say that."

"What *would* you say?" she demanded, unsure exactly how helpful this line of conversation would be for improving their tattered relationship.

She knew she loved him, sure, but with every word that came out of his mouth, she was finding she was liking this new Mike Wheeler less and less.

The cool breeze had put his cigarette out. Cupping his left hand around his lighter's flame, he relit and took another long puff.

He shrugged. "I mean, normal's gone, right?"

That pissed her off. Snatching the cigarette out of his mouth, Jane stamped on it hard and stomped back into the motel room.

He was being a brat.

Hopper had taught her that word, and it had stuck with her forever. To her, it meant someone acting needlessly petulant; childish and petty. Only children acted like the whole world revolved around them.

He followed her in.

"I thought about it, you know!" he exclaimed, slamming the front door. "Even then—even when I was so mad at you, it made me sick to my guts—I *still* thought about how you'd look in a dress like that, Hopper walking you down the aisle, flowers in your hair..."

She rounded on him halfway across the living room. "What are you trying to tell me here, Mike? That you love me or hate me? Either way, you need therapy!"

"Because that worked out so well for you, didn't it?" he called after her, and when she scowled and rolled her eyes, he chased her into the bedroom.

"You think it's fucked up if I still love you?"

"I think going from a hate fuck to marriage is a bit of a stretch!" she fired back.

"It wasn't a hate fuck—I'm just mad at you!"

"Yeah?" She threw a pillow at him, irritated when he caught it. "Well, I'm mad at you! What the fuck was that, acting like everything was normal while Steve and Dustin were here? Pretending like *nothing* happened?!"

He grimaced. "I'm not pretending it didn't happen, all right? I just don't know what to say about it—I don't know what it was."

"Well, it certainly didn't feel like forgiveness," she muttered.

His expression soured even further, more rage flickering just under the surface. "That's because it wasn't. You think one fuck and everything's going to be all right?"

"No, Mike, with your track record, I think *you* think one fuck and everything's going to be all right!"

"Oh, trust me." His bitterness was biting. "I'm under no illusion that one fuck has the power to do anything."

"Well, that's great, Mike. Let's just keep not talking and deal with things your way—let's just screw and screw and screw until there's nothing left!"

"What do you want from me?!" he burst out, making her jump. "I don't know if I'm glad that you're back! Okay? I don't know!" His breath hitched suddenly as his gaze swept over her, his knuckles turning white as they fisted in the pillow. "Do you know how it feels to see you and talk to you and, fuck me, be inside you again? El, I can't *breathe*!"

Jane felt like screaming in frustration. "Do you not understand what's happening? I'm back because it wasn't my fault!"

"No, you're back because Dustin had a hunch!"

She could have strangled him. Instead, however, she busied herself emptying the contents of Dustin's laundry bag onto the mattress. She didn't want to spend the whole night arguing with Mike and, once they were done, she expected she'd have some time alone to put her increasingly complex theories to paper.

He threw the pillow back at her, it landing inches from her face. The bed was their new countertop, it seemed, standing between them like a great wall separating two war-ready armies.

"It just so happens that that hunch happened to be true."

She'd been wrong before—*now* she could have strangled him.

She shoved the pillow aside, straightening up. "Do you *want* me to be guilty?!"

"No, I don't *want* you to be guilty!" he yelled exasperatedly, as if she were being purposely obtuse. "I'm just mad that I spent four years loving you even when you *were* guilty!"

He raked his fingers through his hair again.

"El, you treated me like you didn't care—you threw me out like garbage! I was a wreck! And now I understand why you did it but you still did it! Am I suddenly just supposed to be okay with that?"

She stared at him, taking a deep breath. They'd argued before, but this was their first screaming match. Even when she'd cheated and he'd broken down, he'd only yelled until he'd cried. There'd never been this much anger in a room with them before. Or, at least, this much that they'd set free.

Maybe the quiet rage, for them, had been like small talk—just putting off the inevitable, and making it worse in the meantime.

Now it was like they couldn't stop.

"So, last night was what?" she demanded. "Revenge? To hurt me? To change things? What? I don't understand why you would—"

"Because I wanted to!" he bellowed. "Because I wanted you—so badly!" There was that accusatory gaze again, but it was quickly eclipsed by obvious pain. "And I felt sick to my stomach after because of how I did it and when I did it and I *still* feel sick, because I still hate you! I hate that you have so much power over me and I hate that I couldn't get it together when you were gone! I hate that I'm still that stupid kid sitting on his walkie-talkie waiting for you and I *hate* that I don't even want to stop! Do you know how much of my life I've spent missing you? Do you know the last time I was happy?"

Jane felt like crying at this point. "I don't."

He deflated. "Probably the last time I had you on your back. How broken is that?"

Jane pressed her lips together firmly, controlling herself as her eyes brimmed. "So, we're broken. So, what? Who wouldn't be after the shit we've had to go through?"

"But that's my point exactly, El—we didn't have to!" He jabbed a finger at her. "You made that call. Not me. *You* decided that was it for us." He clutched his side, as if he were nursing a real wound. "I mean, I—I still wanted to forgive you. Did you know I tried to see you again—one more time after the trial?"

She looked down. There it was. "I did."

She couldn't see his face, but she could hear his shocked betrayal in his silence. It resounded in her ears.

He choked out a response. "Oh, you-you did? Great, so what? You decided it would be easier for me, did you? 'Give him a clean break and let him hate you.' Is that what you thought?"

Jane bit her lip. "Something along those lines, yes."

"Because it's so easy to make people hate when you don't let them understand?"

She took a deep breath. "Mike..."

"They ordered you to cheat on me," he cut in. "They ordered you to kill Hopper. Did they order you to send me away?"

Hesitantly, she met his eyes and she noticed his were gleaming—not with anger this time. Her heart dropped.

"I don't think they anticipated you coming back."

"So, that's a 'no', then," he translated. "You did that."

She swallowed, resigned. "Yes, I did, but who knows what they would have done if I hadn't? Mike, I just wanted you to move on and have a chance at—"

"Do I *look* like I've moved on?!" he exploded, gesturing wildly around where they were. When she couldn't answer, he conceded harshly,

"I've fucked a few girls, El. That's true. College was the perfect place to try to fuck you out of me."

He hung his head, wincing, as if remembering left a bad taste in his mouth and an ache in his chest. Now he was the one who sounded resigned.

"But every night, I'd come home, and I'd go to sleep alone, and I'd feel disgusting for what I'd done." His voice broke. "Because cheating on even the ghost of you just felt wrong."

As much as it hurt her to hear that he'd slept with anyone else, Jane pictured it: him coming home to his dark dorm room at night, lying in bed feeling empty, feeling like every new day he woke up to was just another opportunity to feel like the world was going on without him and he was stuck in the past—that feeling that this wasn't how it was supposed to be never leaving, never fading.

She didn't have to imagine, really, because she'd felt it, that same feeling, every day.

And it was because she knew how he felt that she knew she was done fighting now. She reached for him.

His shining eyes flickered to hers warily as she slid her hand into his and led him gently toward the edge of the bed, where they sat down side by side. Jane kept his hand clasped between hers in her lap.

"Listen to me," she implored gently. She could see that he, like her, didn't want to fight. He just didn't want to get hurt. He didn't want to go through that again.

"I can't make it better," she admitted. "You're right. We're new people—we're older. We're like broken bones that didn't heal right. I know."

She bit her lip, squeezing his hand, maybe more as her lifeline than for his comfort.

"I wanted to come back and change it all. I think, in some twisted way, I thought I could take it all back." The first tears slipped down her cheeks. "But Dad's gone. We're broken. I can't fix any of it." She tried to make a joke. "I think the last time I felt like this was

Thanksgiving dinner, junior year." She shook her head. "I still can't cook."

Beside her, Mike slouched a little, the side of his arm brushing hers.

"You were good at other things," he murmured.

She could only stare at their joined hands. "You ever jump off a cliff again, I'm your girl."

"I'm not talking about your powers, El." He adjusted the way he was sitting, turning to face her. He still wasn't looking at her but he was getting closer.

"You listened," he murmured throatily. "Even when you were mad, you always listened. And you always said the right thing, even if I didn't think so at the time sometimes. It was never about fixing things back then, you just... You always knew how to make it better. And then..." He dropped his gaze even lower, if that were possible, suddenly awkward. Maybe even embarrassed. "There was the other stuff."

Jane's forehead crinkled. "What other stuff?"

"You know..." He glanced at her face for the first time in minutes—her mouth, more specifically, and Jane thought she sensed him lean the most indiscernible bit closer.

She half expected him to steer the conversation in a direction that, two minutes ago, would have seemed beyond impossible.

But he didn't.

"You were always strong," he confessed quietly. "You could survive anything."

"Some things were harder than others, believe me."

His dark eyes studied her. "But you're still here."

Jane felt a small tug at her hand and realised he'd pulled it onto his knee, his fingers lacing through hers.

"You always were stubborn as hell." He tried and failed to blink away the first traitorous tear that spilled down his cheek. "Drove me crazy."

"If I hadn't made the decisions, we would've never got anything done," she mumbled back, realising she'd just proven his point for him.

She slid him a sideways glance and realised that, at that, he'd almost smiled.

"You did make the decisions." He nodded slowly. "You made them fast, like... Like if you didn't, we might lose our chance."

Jane stayed perfectly still, processing his words, unsure of what to do with them—unsure of what to do with any of it. She didn't want to spook him again by saying or doing the wrong thing.

"There's this concept in Chaos Theory called the butterfly effect," he said after a moment. "A lot of people get it wrong because they think it means that everything happens for a reason, but really it's the notion that control is a human pipedream. Even though everything is cause and effect, the rational order of chaos is so complex that it exceeds our ability to predict beyond a certain degree of accuracy. There are just too many variables for us to comprehend."

Jane looked down; he was stroking her knuckles now absently.

"What are you saying, Mike?" she asked.

He didn't sound angry anymore, but she wondered if he resented her denying him the little control he could have had. Or maybe his point was simply that he wished some butterfly could have made it all happen differently?

She couldn't really think about it like that. A butterfly flaps its wings and suddenly the Cold War never happened. She never went to Central State, Hopper never died, but she never even came to Hawkins and, if she were even born at all, her life was just so fucking incomprehensibly different to how it had turned out that she probably wasn't even the same person. For all the torment Jane had gone through in this life, Hopper had taught her one thing that she

would never, ever forget: the way we handle our pain is what makes us. Like forging metal—the hammering in the fire determines the final blade.

But, in reality, Mike's response was nothing like she had imagined it.

"I used to wonder if maybe you could," he murmured. "I used to wonder if you were always so sure because, somehow, you could comprehend what the rest of us couldn't. I used to wonder if the reason you always acted first was because you knew what it could mean, if you left something you knew you should've done now until later."

"Do you want me to pretend I do?"

He was leaning in so close now, she could almost feel him.

Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head. "I want you to tell me what happens next."

Jane could feel that finely tuned equilibrium in the air again, but it wasn't electric this time. It wasn't wavering under the pressure of years of anger and doubt and faithlessness. It felt like that split second of suspension when one steps off a ledge into empty space, like when Mike stood at the edge of the cliff at the quarry when they were kids.

"It's not up to me," she answered carefully. "Like you said, there are too many variables. It's not about now or later. It's not about when. It's about if."

"And *if* I were to choose," he murmured back, and Jane saw the evidence of his nerves as his Adam's apple bobbed. "*If* I said screw everything else and just thought about what it really comes down to—one question—what would you tell me?"

His gaze was fixed on her lips and, without noticing how they got there, Jane realised his hands had abandoned hers on his knee and were slowly sliding up the lines of her body, making her forget every scar and imperfection she'd ever had, before they came to rest, cradling the sides of her face.

Maybe Jane couldn't perceive all the variables—maybe she had no idea how any of this was going to turn out. Maybe everything they'd suffered to reach this point meant nothing and when they were all dead and gone, the Bad Men would be the ones who wrote history however they liked.

But not today.

The endgame didn't matter right now. Not to her. Not at all.

She felt she could hardly breathe as she whispered, "Now?"

His eyes flickered to hers, his deep and piercing and beyond betraying any kind of nerves. He couldn't blame this on spontaneity or anger or confusion or lust. This was it now.

His leaned in until their foreheads touched and his eyes were burning into hers; his lips were slightly parted like he could already taste her, his fingers knotting in the roots of her hair. "Don't tell me to stop."

She gripped his sweater's crew neck tightly as she pulled him the rest of the way into her. "Don't ever smoke again."

She didn't want to be strangers anymore. She was sick of bad habits and, more than anything, feeling like one.

She was sick of hiding and not recognising herself in the mirror.

Whether she was Jane or Eleven, she would always be a Hopper, and her father had taught her better than to be afraid.

She didn't want not to want anymore.

She just wanted Mike.

And with one silent nod, agreeing to her terms, he kissed her softly and the world swirled away.

AN:

Okay, guys, talk to me. I rewrote the ending what must have been

almost a dozen times and, in the end, I decided to go with honest simplicity—and something for you guys to look forward to in the opening of the next chapter.

I know that, in some places, Mike and El both seemed melodramatic in this one, and I puzzled over how to fix this but I've ultimately decided that in such an emotionally strenuous 'discussion' as this, a fair bit of melodrama would realistically get thrown around.

Much love,

Inara x

**EDIT: Guys, I've re-edited, as stated above, but yet again, I'm publishing past midnight (typical me), so if you do pick up on any errors, please PM me to let me know so I can fix them! Thank you!*
x

11. Lay Calm

AN:

Guys.

I don't even know what to say.

First of all, obviously, I'm so sorry - I know, it's been months without word. To be honest, I haven't really been on here in the past few months to check messages or reviews. It's not that I prioritised other projects or anything. It's just been a bit of a rough few months. As my friends all know, I hate the idea of not being a 'coper' but when life (and that pesky thing called love) gets overwhelming, I do that whole 'curl up in a dark room, put on the greatest tragic love ballads of the 1980s and don't move or speak for twelve hours' kind of thing... Except for months on end. Pa-freaking-thetic, I know, but hey. I'm back now, and life and love are distinctly better. Don't let nobody tell you that you can't fix things right up with a bit of extra effort and elbow grease! :P

I want you all to know that while it's prime assignment and exams-coming-up-and-I-want-to-get-hit-by-a-car-so-I-have-a-good-excuse-not-to-take-them time at uni right now, but I have been procrastinating by planning out future chapters that you will see go up between now and end of July. Multiple long, long chapters. You've all been so good to me in the past. Now that I'm able again, I need to be good to you. Plus, Mike and Eleven and Stranger Things in general are good for the soul.

So. This chapter.

I'll say it first: it's short af. I know. I'm sorry. But since I checked your messages this morning and got stuck into writing at least SOMETHING, my beautiful darling EvieArendelle convinced me to upload today (after offering her invaluable critiques, of course) if the rest of the chapter wasn't going to be ready for another week. So, originally, this was just the first part of a much longer chapter. But this actually works out well, since the rest of the chapter is going to make up a long enough Chapter 12 as it is.

(Sidenote: Evie, you're the light of my life and you bet your top dollar that when I come visit you in the US at Christmas, I will be so greedy with your time that your boyfriend will not see you for weeks. :P)

Anyway.

I hope that, even though it's the shortest chapter ever, you guys enjoy and that, although it doesn't really progress the plot at all beyond what Chapters 9 and 10 already established, it keeps your Mileven hearts warm for another week.

I'll see you with Chapter 12 soon.

-Inara xx

Eleven Lay Calm

His lips were warm; soft. He cradled her face, her waist, her face again.

He knew—knew that, no matter how strong she was, he could still break her so easily.

How easily they could break each other.

He watched her with heavy-lidded eyes as she stood up from the bed. He didn't move as she turned on the bedside lamp and switched off the main light at the wall by the door. Closing that, she leaned back against it. Only then did Mike stand.

He was so tall. Jane felt so small as he came closer, so soft as his fingers trailed down the length of her arms. His eyes found hers as he found the hem of her T-shirt. He wasn't so much asking permission as he was ensuring she understood his intention.

Wordlessly, she nodded.

The cotton skimmed her stomach, her breasts, her face as he lifted it over her head. She helped him, raising her arms, lowering them again only to his waist.

He exhaled slowly—cautiously—as he took her in for a moment, and Jane felt truly beautiful as he combed his fingers through her hair.

His eyes were on hers. They didn't falter as he leaned in again—slow enough to send her heart thumping wildly against the inside of her chest—and brushed his lips against hers. So gentle. So reassuring.

Then she felt his fingers skimming her side. So many years unaware of the very existence of her scars and all of a sudden, they were so at the forefront of her conscious mind that they may as well have been burning like fire.

But Mike's fingers were soothing and undeterred.

Jane wasn't a fool. She knew that her mutilation was minor in the grand scheme of things—it wasn't as if all of a sudden Mike saw a hardly recognisable *thing* in her place.

She had more faith in him than to fear his revulsion.

It wasn't that.

She felt both guilty and wronged at the same time. She was a victim, to be sure, and, quite bluntly, had been a child when Ford and Welling had taken their advantage. But she couldn't help also feeling stupid; weak. All her suffering in the past, all her mother's suffering—what had it been for if not to make her stronger? With these powers, wasn't she supposed to be strong? Wasn't she supposed to be the saviour rather than the saved? She'd been so weak and so trusting that she hadn't even been able to save Mike from herself—hadn't been able to save her own father.

What was her purpose if not to protect the ones she loved?

Mike's face crumpled as he traced her old wounds. She may as well have been bleeding in front of him.

Jane shook her head, taking his hand away; sliding her own into it, squeezing it.

We're okay, she was saying. *We're okay now.*

He squeezed back, but the doubt in his expression didn't clear. The guilt didn't abate.

With a small tug, he led her back to the bed, where he sat down again in front of her.

She let him guide her closer between his legs.

She was self-conscious, still so thin her stomach concaved and so thoroughly scarred that it was almost all she could see. But he wasn't seeing the ugliness now. Maybe he knew how crucial this moment was for her—how important it was to her that he see *her*, be with *her*, and not her scars.

His fingers were gentle as they coaxed her closer to him, then firm on her waist as he leaned in, torturously unhurried, and kissed the bare skin in front of him.

She shivered as his fingers slid behind her, bunching the fabric at the waistband of her pyjama pants. His warm breath scorched her as his tongue brushed the thin skin just beneath her breasts. Her fingers slid into his hair and she pulled his head back.

It was the most tantalising picture: his nose dragging away from her flesh, his tongue and mouth unwilling to do the same, his lower lip and teeth still dragging against her skin. He stared up at her with hungry eyes through his floppy hair and thick eyelashes.

I want you, they said, and Jane felt her stomach flutter.

She felt a lot of things.

Unfortunately, one of those things was what she could and couldn't take right now. Physically, emotionally... It was all just too much too soon.

After so many years of pain, she didn't want more of the same when it came to Mike. Before, she'd never been a perfectionist when it came to moments—she'd always been of the belief that things happened when they did for a reason, and that one should never try to put off the inevitable. Like small talk.

But apparently there was an exception for everything.

"We can't," she whispered. Her voice, although quiet, was jarring even to her own ears as it broke the longstanding silence.

For just a moment, confusion brought that caustic edge back to Mike's features, the walls surging back up, but seeing the vulnerability in her eyes, it evaporated.

He leaned away from her a fraction, still holding her.

She shook her head, taking his face in her hands. "I want to. I just..."

"I understand." He offered her a barely-there smile. She didn't need to say anything else.

Still cradling his face, Jane felt a glimmer of yearning. It wasn't hunger so much as the feeling that something was missing.

Jane couldn't remember even the basics of high school French but the one phrase that had stuck with her after all these years was, 'Tu me manques.'

Not just 'I miss you,' but, more closely, 'You are missing from me.'

It was like saying, 'You are a part of me.'

'You are like air, like water, like blood.'

'I cannot be without you.'

'I cannot be *me* without you.'

Mike wasn't missing from her anymore—he was right here—but she needed him to be closer still. She needed him to make her believe he was never going away again.

Mike seemed to sense the small change in the atmosphere of the room, this different need in her.

His gaze darkened a fraction, and, while he accepted her boundaries for tonight, he knew there were some things to which she wouldn't

object. "What?"

Jane bit her lip for a second, feeling his fingers tighten around her hips again. "I want you to kiss me."

He stared up at her, daring her to lose herself in what she wanted. Under any other circumstances, he would've been smug. With those huge doe eyes but inner strength and self-possession, El had always looked the impossible contradiction of pure and uncorrupted and like a girl who knew, at all times, exactly what she wanted.

He'd always loved it when she asked for it.

He'd loved it even more when she simply took it.

He sat as tall as he could to bring their mouths closer, his jaw tilting up as his gaze burned into her lips. She'd already leaned in a fraction, feeling the same pull he couldn't resist—had never been able to resist.

"So, kiss me," he murmured.

It had been years since they'd been a real couple, comfortable and lazy and habitual, but it was amazing how, even then, the moment before every kiss felt electric. When the air thickened, when the space between them felt so charged with anticipation that Mike had always felt his breath catch. Every time.

It didn't need proving anymore. This woman would be the death of him. Without even trying, she'd been the beginning and the end in one staggering, rain-soaked moment. Mike knew he hadn't understood it then, at first sight of those knobbly knees and giant yellow T-shirt, but he'd felt the whole world shift.

He still felt that way, every time he looked at her.

And when she leaned into him, pressing her lips against his—tentatively at first, and then melting into him—his response was instantaneous, instinctive.

She wanted him to kiss her? He'd kiss her.

He'd kiss her everywhere—so deeply and for so long that he'd make

her number of sighs match the number of tears she'd shed in the last four years.

He'd make her cry in ecstasy as many times as it took for her to forget every cry of pain.

And then he'd hold her, all night.

God, he'd waited years to hold her all night.

He'd drive the demons away.

AN:

One last thing, everyone. I know it's not 80s, or even 90s, but the song 'Surrender' by Walk the Moon is one of my favourite songs and my first time hearing it was actually what inspired this whole story. Then, there was also 'Unsteady' by X Ambassadors and 'Only You' by Yazoo (now that one was 80s!). Once I finish this story up in another ten to twelve chapters or so, I'll probably just post a playlist of all the songs I listened to a lot while writing this fic, just for anyone who's interested. Some are extremely angsty but others are good ol' classics.

And just for anyone who's wondering, I'm not going to drop the Stranger Things fandom once this story is over. I continue to be obsessed with all the characters and the whole world that the brilliant Duffer Brothers created. I probably won't write any more really long stories like this one will end up being, but definitely some shorter fics. Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about the lighter one-shots.

My next story will probably be all about Steve, though. I'm thinking we could all glean a few laughs from the backstory on how he and Dustin ended up living together. Obviously, I'm finishing TRWD first. But just keeping you guys in the loop. :)